

Parenting identities, practices and social support  
in popular parenting websites: a narrative  
approach

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## **Declaration**

I,                    confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.  
                      Where information has been derived from other  
                      sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the  
   thesis.

## **Abstract**

The thesis explores the relationship between dominant discourses of 'parenting' and social support on two popular parenting websites. It also examines the narratives of mothering and online practices of users. Methodologically, narrative is foregrounded in the interpretive analysis of psychosocial meaning. Data are treated as phenomenological accounts of experience. Drawing on sociological research into parenting websites the thesis critically considers popular online support spaces in which parents (primarily mothers) position themselves. The study has a three-phase design. First, a multimodal analysis of key features of homepage data to explore dominant discourses around which the websites are organized. Second, narrative analysis of interviews with the websites' managers and moderators. How the stories each told of Mumsnet's and Netmums' foundation positioned the websites, both to other online and offline social support for parents and wider culture, is examined. Third, to investigate the conditions and purposes for which mothers use these websites, accounts of a small sample of users are examined. This phase focuses on: i) the application of social practice theory to the use of these websites embedded in mothers' everyday lives; ii) narrative analysis of turning points in women's experiences of motherhood, illuminating the role of online parenting forums in the construction of parenting identities. There was notable congruence between the accounts of users interviewed, the managers' stories, and the visual construction of the websites. The practice of using Mumsnet entailed a defined set of practices involving a level of commitment to that forum, while Netmums use was framed as complementing, rather than an alternative to, other forms of face-to-face social support. Key differences were found in the ways the users made sense of their motherhood transitions.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1: Introduction:**

This study was started eighteen months into the Conservative-led coalition government following what in some quarters had been dubbed ‘The Mumsnet Election’ of 2010 (Asthana, Doward, Ferguson, Helm, & Thorpe, 2010). Popular parenting websites - Mumsnet in particular – continued to be courted by politicians during the 2015 election and beyond. During this time parenting websites have become increasingly visible in the media – Mumsnet’s founders were voted 7<sup>th</sup> most powerful women in the ‘Women’s Hour’ Power List 2013 (Press Association, 2013) and Netmums founders were awarded OBEs in January 2014 (‘New Year Honours 2014: The Full List’, 2014). This raises important issues about how parenting identities are constructed and how mothers and fathers establish and negotiate their parenting practices online. The use of online support forums in particular constitutes a set of as yet under-explored and relatively new parenting practices.

This study considers the use of popular parenting websites in the context of recent empirical research examining the increasing prevalence of a discourse of ‘intensive parenting’, founded on the now dominant cultural ideology of neoliberalism (Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2012). How popular UK-based websites, Mumsnet and Netmums, may draw on such discourses is explored. Additionally, the relationship between wider discourses of ‘parenting’ and users’ of the websites narrative construction of parenting identities and practices is examined. The different forms of online parenting support offered by Mumsnet and Netmums and what meaning this may hold at both a sociological and a psychological level is also explored. Thus, the study is psychosocial and two concepts are central - social identities and practices.

Being affiliated to the ESRC’s National Centre for Research Methods Phase III node, Narratives of Varied Everyday Lives and Linked Approaches (NOVELLA), my study also has a methodological aim of

developing research methods for online data analysis, particularly relating to narrative approaches. NOVELLA was concerned with the everyday habitual practices of families that are often taken for granted<sup>1</sup>. A key contribution of my study to the wider NOVELLA project was the collection of new data relating to online parenting identities and practices.

## **1.2: Outline of the thesis:**

This thesis has a dual theoretical focus. Firstly, it explores dominant discourses on two popular parenting websites – Mumsnet and Netmums – and how these may relate to wider cultural narratives of parenting and social support.

Secondly, it examines the narratives of mothering and online practices of three users from each website. The ways in which lived experiences of parenthood are told, particularly how identities of motherhood are constructed and the framing of the use of parenting websites as a social practice, are considered throughout the second phase. The relationship between individual users' narratives and wider social, cultural and psychological discourses - for example pertaining to social class, gender, ethnicity, ambivalence and depression – is also discussed.

As well as these dual substantive foci the thesis has a methodological focus, applying a range of approaches to explore different perspectives of online constructions and narratives of parenting.

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<sup>1</sup> There were six interrelated studies in which narrative methods were applied in different ways using existing qualitative datasets. Together these studies were methodologically innovative in exploring disconnections between behaviour and constructed meaning in the understanding of habitual practices. My study was affiliated to the Parenting Identities and Practices project. This project involved secondary analysis of two prior studies (Transforming Experiences and Fathering over the Generations) that employed different narrative methods and considered the narration of family practices over the life course and long time spans (Phoenix & Brannen 2014).

Following this chapter, I review the substantive academic literature relating to parenting, social support and the Internet. Empirical literature on parenting and social support will be covered to provide context for a more comprehensive review of research specifically on parenthood and the Internet. Studies of both expert and informal advice will be examined. Chapter three focuses on the theoretical concepts and methods used in my study, drawing on relevant literature.

The four following chapters all focus on different analytical perspectives: Chapter four explores the materiality of Mumsnet and Netmums, illuminating how particular discourses of parenting and social support are visually foregrounded. Multimodal discourse analysis was used to examine key features of a sample of Mumsnet and Netmums homepages, such as logo and font, and how these interact with one another to produce a more or less coherent discursive ensemble. In Chapter five, I analyse the narratives of the websites as told in telephone and online interviews with their founders, as well as a member of the support teams from each website. Chapters six and seven continue to explore dominant discourses and canonical narratives of 'parenting', though the focus shifts to examine experiential accounts of those who use the websites. Twelve individual email and face-to-face interviews were conducted with six women – three Mumsnet users and three who use Netmums. Chapter six frames the use of popular parenting websites as a social practice. My analysis draws on Shove, Pantzar, and Watson's (2012) application of theories of practice to everyday life and social change to frame online parenting forum use as a relatively new social practice or set of practices. This approach offers a more nuanced and relational picture of online parenting forum use than previous research and is detailed in Chapters 3 and 6. As the transition to motherhood constitutes a major life course transition, perhaps unsurprisingly turning points in the experience of becoming a mother were a recurrent theme in each of the interviews with the six participants. Accordingly, chapter seven discusses how the women I interviewed narrated turning points in their experiences of motherhood, and whether and how these narratives intersected with their talk about using online parenting forums. Shifting the

focus from practices, the chapter explores the identities that these women constructed as mothers and the ways in which online parenting forums enabled them to express these identities or not. While the narratives in my study are those of particular individuals' construction of identities, the women select from discourses that are widely available in society – so in this sense their accounts are psychosocial. The eighth and final chapter draws together the analysis chapters, moving towards a conclusion of the study's exploration of the recursive relationship between individuals' online and face-to-face narratives of parenting identities and practices, and dominant discourses of 'parenting'. This chapter also includes a discussion of the relative usefulness to researching online parenting practices and identities of the different methods I applied at different stages of analysis.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1: Introduction**

At over 3 billion users, around 40% of the worldwide population now have an Internet connection ('Internet World Stats', 2015). The contemporary age of the 'social internet' is demarcated from the supposedly less interactive and static preceding 'Web 1.0' as 'Web 2.0' (O'Reilly, 2005). However, interpersonal interaction and small group, organisational communication processes now ubiquitous in online discussion forums, blogs, and social network sites were present from the late 1960s in the ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network). This system and subsequent Usenet groups and 'multi-user dungeons' games of the 1980s formed the foundation of the modern internet, made popularly available in 1993 with the first web browser Mosaic (Lievrouw, 2012; Page, 2012). Nevertheless, the Internet has transformed over the last ten years or so, from predominantly one-way and text-based to a multimodal medium. The rapid increase in possibilities for access with the proliferation of Wifi technology and mobile devices 'freeing communities from the tyranny of geography' (Ryan, 2010: p.8), have seen participatory online communities and cultures become more taken for granted as habitually integrated into everyday life (Beer & Burrows, 2010; Page, 2012; Lievrouw, 2012). The integration of the practice of using online parenting forums with everyday parenting practices and identities is a key concern in my study, as are ideological aspects of parenting support and whether and how they may manifest in popular parenting websites. Hence, the field of literature reviewed in this chapter will be that pertaining to the group under study, i.e. parents who use popular parenting websites.

While there has been a considerable volume of research conducted into children and adolescents' social use of the Internet (Buckingham, 2013; Livingstone, 2008; Ringrose, 2011) there has been markedly less specifically addressing parents' use. There is a plethora of information,

consumption and social networking opportunities available for parents on the Internet (Carter, 2007). The advent of web 2.0 technology and online social networking has seen an increase in parents, especially mothers, seeking virtual emotional support from their geographically dispersed peers (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). Indeed, it is argued that the rise of mobile post-modern society has led parents to become more isolated from traditional advice and support (Rothbaum Martland, & Beswick, 2008), such as that which previously might have been offered by their own parents. Online parenting communities have been shown to be valuable for particular groups who may otherwise find themselves isolated, for example young, single mothers (Dunham, Hurshman, Litwin, Gusella, Ellsworth, & Dodd, 1998), those mourning the loss of a child (Aho, Paavilainen, & Kaunonen, 2012), parents of children with health conditions such as asthma (Stewart, Letourneau, Masuda, Anderson, & McGhan, 2011) or chronic child disabilities (Shilling, Morris, Thompson-Coon, Ukoumunne, & Logan, 2013), and those suffering with postnatal depression (Evans, Donelle, & Hume-Loveland, 2012). The opportunity for parents who are dealing with particular issues beyond their previous experience and knowledge to access others' personal experiences online has consistently been shown to be valued alongside more official and medical information (Niela-Vielan, Axelin, Salanterä, & Melender, 2014).

The current study contributes to filling a gap, identified by Danebak and Plantin (2008) for future research on parenthood and the internet to extend its focus beyond particular groups, such as those cited above, and to include 'regular' parents in non-clinical everyday settings. My study does this through its focus on how popular discourses of 'parenting' may be framed in popular parenting websites, and how parent-users position themselves in relation to these and use the websites for their own experiences. Niela-Vilen et al.'s (2014) review of online peer support for parents also identified a lack of in-depth qualitative studies of experiences and understandings of parenting forums from the perspective of users. In deploying a narrative approach to analyse the practices and identities of individuals who use the websites, my study makes an important contribution towards filling this methodological gap.

In this chapter, I first review relevant empirical literature on parenting and social support. The rest of the chapter will focus on studies of parents' Internet use. This review paves the way for the conceptual framing of my study in theoretical literature and the discussion of my research questions in Chapter three. My research questions will be introduced at the close of this current chapter.

## 2.2: Parenthood and social support

This section begins with defining some key terms. Secondly, an overview of the history of expert childcare advice is provided. Thirdly, key studies related to state-sponsored parenting support and contemporary expert advice to mothers are reviewed. Next, studies of parenting and cultural capital and distinction are reviewed, and finally contemporary studies of ideological aspects of parenting support.

### 2.2.1: Definitions

#### 'Parenting'

Before I begin I want to make a brief but key semantic point: the now popular word 'parenting' implies a genderless practice, but it is still in fact mothers who more often act as prime carers (Edwards & Gillies, 2011). With this in mind, 'parenting' may be assumed to hold a similar meaning to 'mothering', and at times I may use the terms interchangeably. While I have decided not to exclusively use the term 'mothering' (as this excludes fathers entirely), at any point that I am referring unequivocally to *only* mothers or *only* fathers I will use the definitive terms.

#### Social support

In terms of defining social support, Ann Oakley's work is particularly informative. Going beyond the tautology that 'social support consists of support that is social' (Lin et al., 1979 in Oakley, 1992 p.27), Oakley cites

Wellman's (1979) work on the intimate ties of Toronto's East Yorkers, stating,

'Close friends are not always able to provide more useful support and help than more distant contacts, whose unfamiliarity with the issues at stake can facilitate needed (in)formation (sic) and advice.' (Oakley, 1992, p.27)

Wellman's (1979) research found that even though 61% of people said they had at least five intimate ties, only 30 per cent of these were seen as sources of help in emergencies, and only 22 per cent as helping with everyday needs. This is especially notable in relation to the current study, as Wellman went on to publish key early theories about social ties in cyber space (Wellman, 1999). The key point here is that social support is multi-faceted, there being no simplistic definition – but rather it depends on the design and topic of the given study. In relation to motherhood and pregnancy it has historically been seen to vary from

'... the expansive view that support is the overriding construct for the provision of social relationships, to the specifically focused view that support is information, nurturance, empathy, encouragement, validating behaviour, constructive genuineness, sharedness and reciprocity, instrumental help, or recognition of competence.' (Brown, 1986, as cited in Oakley, 1992, p. 27).

It is important also to note that different people may find different types and aspects of social support vary in value. For example, while it is the case that connections with other people are necessary in order to gain social support, they are not equivalent to it or a guarantee of access to it (Gottlieb, 1981 as cited in Oakley, 1992). Rather than measuring outcomes according to a predefined construct of what constitutes social support, my study explores the ways in which popular websites for parents are constructed as supportive and the different ways in which individual

mothers who use them find them supportive or not - what the practice *means* to them. For this reason, I feel it would be reductive for me to provide a fixed definition of social support – suffice to say that I concur with the notion cited above that different kinds and aspects of social support vary in value for different people.

### 2.2.2: History of expert childcare advice

It is important to note that the historical view of childcare advice emphasises the degree to which it reflects the social, political and economic context of any given period. For example, in the mid-eighteenth century, William Cadogan – the first popular childcare ‘expert’ – opened his ‘Essay Upon Nursing and the management of children’ (1748) thus, ‘It is with great pleasure I see at last the Preservation of Children become the care of Men of Sense (that had been for) ... too long fatally left to the Management of Women, who cannot be supposed to have proper Knowledge to fit them for such a Task’. This reflected the dominance of men in medicine at that time, with philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau expressing their views on both the morality of child management and practical issues such as breastfeeding. However, this male dominance was tempered by the presence of women such as Hannah More and Maria Edgeworth, who may be credited with early recognition that the child was a person with rights of their own, and introduced a more compassionate approach involving praise and affection. Whilst having to defer to male medical expertise, women writers remained confident in their experiential expertise and common-sense knowledge through the nineteenth century (Hardyment, 2007).

Swedish feminist writer and early advocate of child-centred childrearing and education for motherhood Ellen Key declared that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century would be ‘The Century of the Child’ (Key, 1909, as cited in Hardyment, 2007) and the Renaissance of Motherhood (Key, 1914, as cited in Hardyment, 2007). However, this did not quite come to pass from an experiential perspective. The turn of the century saw women pushed further into subservient roles in the face of increasingly scientific

masculinist approaches such as Truby King's 'mothercraft' and Watson's behaviourism. Dominant prior to the second world war, behaviorism was founded in stimulus-response models of Animal Psychology. Reacting against the indulgencies of The Child Study movement, Watson extolled the notion that children could be trained to fit into an adult world. The behaviourist approach resonated with an apprehensive world recovering from the austerity of war with children framed as having military purpose. The eventual popularisation of Freud's psychoanalysis, Bowlby's attachment and then Piaget's cognitive development theories in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as a reaction against the emotionless behaviourist approach. The popularizing of psychoanalytic concepts such as the libidinal mother '... who instinctively needed her child as much as her child needed her' (Ehrenreich & English, 2005, p.243) was reflective of the socio-political climate of the postwar period of optimistic consumerism. Postwar manuals – most notably Doctor Spock's hugely successful 'Commonsense book of baby and child care' – followed the influential 'Babies are human beings' (Aldrich & Aldrich, 1938, as cited in Hardyment, 2007) in embracing a child-centred approach.

The birth of psychology as a scientific discipline in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century has been recognized as offering potential to enable the meeting of real needs with women playing a central role. However, in their historical account of two hundred years of expert advice to women Ehrenreich and English (2005) argue that male-dominated psychology in fact served as a new form of patriarchal authority – at a distance from the experiences of women and children themselves. Although this seemingly new humanizing world of child-centred advice finally gave a central place to children and mothers, the books telling women to just relax and trust their instincts still defined what those instincts ought to be. The positioning of mother and child as 'two happily matched consumers consuming each other' (Ehrenreich & English, 2005, p.243) idealized the mother-child relationship to such a point that maternal integrity finally broke down.

In the late 1960s the popularization of 'over-permissive' child-rearing techniques came to be criticized as in part responsible for ensuing social unrest. Interestingly echoes of this were seen in the period

immediately following the riots in London of 2011, where a lack of parental discipline was framed as a primary cause (Lewis, Newburn, Taylor, McGillivray, Greenhill, Frayman, & Proctor, 2011). As the period of postwar child-centred optimism drew to a close and discipline came to the fore, popular childrearing advice texts, such as Dr. Spock, were updated to reflect this new fashion for limit-setting. The manuals for parents did not abate but continued to be produced through the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas children had been at the centre, the parents' self, or more accurately the mother's self, now joined them on centre stage and this continues in self-help culture that is increasingly prevalent (Rose, 1990; 1998).

Ehrenreich and English (2005) argue that it was the continued mass proliferation of parenting advice that eventually led to experts losing what authority they once had. And yet parenting practices continue to be highly contested – neuroscience research apparently showing the requirement for constant parental attention and stimulation for optimal cognitive development leading to expectations that parenting be more labour-intensive than ever before. That there is no one prevailing theory of childrearing today, how women give birth and care for their babies and children being informed by lifestyle choice and taste as much as science, makes parenting identities and practices in modern maternal culture increasingly important for researchers to consider (Thomson, Kehily, Hadfield, & Sharpe, 2011). Connected to this, the extent that mothers are free to position themselves within maternal culture or are positioned through dominant 'Western' discourses within that still contested culture, is also important.

### State-sponsored parenting support

The very entry of the word 'parenting' into popular usage is reflective of a shift from the word 'parent' relating to an ascribed relationship, rather than to the concerted practice or even 'job' that the verb 'to parent' suggests (Gillies & Edwards, 2011; Ramaekers & Suissa, 2011). This is particularly important in the context of the state-sponsored

industry with its own workforce to promote 'good parenting' - in the shape of parenting skills classes - rolled out since New Labour came to power in 1997. Precursors to these state-sponsored skills classes can be seen in the St. Pancras 'School for Mothers' set up in 1907. Although here the focus was on 'practical help in a friendly club-like atmosphere' (Hardyment, 2007, p.111), and it was somewhat more akin to modern day baby-clinics than 'evidence-based' parenting classes teaching instrumental skills. Echoes of parenting skills classes can also be seen in The Parent Effectiveness Training movement, a purportedly 'no-lose' and learnable method of child-centred discipline that became popular in the USA in the 1970s (Gordon, 1973). State interference in childrearing, which increased in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, has been framed historically as a direct result of the eugenics movement's drive for racial improvement (Hardyment, 2007). Due to rising infant mortality, the state began to 'interfere' for the first time with family functions such as food, housing, health and general welfare with philanthropic and militaristic fervour. While thankfully there was little the state could do to genetically modify society, they could try to tell the public how to raise their children. Deference to authority concerning childrearing amongst the working classes became habitual during this period leading up to the first world war as baby care manuals were spread more widely and the first state-sponsored health visitors were appointed (Hardyment, 2007).

### 2.2.3: Parenting Identities: Gender, social class and ethnicity

In the contemporary self-help era how *you* choose to *parent* - what one consumes and the medium through which that is displayed - speaks to notions of parenting identities. In this context nominally the suggestion is that parenting involves genderless and classless generic fixed skills that can be taught and learnt, but it is in fact mothers – and in particular the poor and marginalized – who are positioned as in need of such training (Holt, 2009). The degree to which prescribed knowledge about parenting is based on middle-class normative ideals of 'good parenting' (Gillies, 2005) is an important consideration. Contextual factors related to ethnicity



and racialization have consistently been found to affect parenting (Phoenix & Husain, 2007; Kotchick & Forehand, 2002; Stewart & Bond, 2002). Phoenix's (1987) concept of 'normalised absence / pathologised presence' to describe how the experiences of minority ethnic families are typically excluded or ignored in research, other than to be associated with social problems such as single and young motherhood, is especially noteworthy.

In their work on parents' differing positioning and understandings of parenting skills advice, depending on social class and gender, Edwards and Gillies (2011) describe normative ideals of 'good parenting' as involving the nurturing and transmission of crucial 'middle-class' values to children to reproduce 'a common good'. They argue that working-class parents are positioned as *clients* of parent support services and understand themselves and their children to be commonplace, whereas middle-class parents are framed as being capable of understanding themselves as proactive consumers of support and *pioneers* seeking expert advice. While there has been and continues to be an intensive governmental focus on the unequivocal relationship between everyday parenting practices and the good of wider society, Edwards et al. (2011) emphasise that 'as lived experience parenting is not classless' (p.145). This statement may also hold for gender, with the gender-neutral term 'parenting' now being the predominant descriptor for an activity that in practice is still predominantly the domain of mothers. Edwards and Gillies argue that this apparently gender-neutral term 'parenting' and subsequent depiction of support services as equally so is not reflective of the gendered practices of fathers and mothers. Furthermore, the word 'parenting' being understood to mean 'mothering' has implications for how relevant fathers and mothers perceive parenting skills education is to them - mothers both being framed as and feeling deskilled and disempowered. Additionally, Edwards and Gillies suggest that 'parenting' classes focus on technical practices, leaving little room for exploring the instinctual link between the practical and emotional facets of childcare.

In other work, Gillies and Edwards' (2011; Edwards and Gillies, 2005) carried out historical comparative analysis of family and parenting and informal and formal support, deploying secondary qualitative analysis to revisit classic qualitative studies (Marsden, 1968; Townsend, 1962). Gillies and Edwards (2011) argue that the failure of contemporary policy debates around parenting deficits to acknowledge or engage with changing understandings and expectations can implicitly invoke a past golden age where good parenting was taken for granted - thus contemporary policy debates and concerns are rendered ahistorical. In relation to both informal and formal support, social class was found to shape experiences and practices consistently, with middle class and working class parents holding different priorities and preoccupations across generations. As the classic studies drawn on were overwhelmingly concerned with working class life there were fewer insights into everyday middle class relationships.

#### Parenting, distinction and cultural capital

Vincent and Ball (2007) explored parental strategies for class reproduction in a qualitative study of middle class parents' enrolment of their under 5s in 'enrichment' activities such as extracurricular music, art and drama classes. Fifty-seven mothers and 14 fathers from 59 different middle class families were interviewed in the London localities of Battersea and Stoke Newington. Applying Bourdieu's (2010) theories of taste, distinction and cultural capital in their analysis, Vincent and Ball suggest that there exist particular 'conditions of acquiring' – for example the class, teacher and equipment involved – that are only available to those with requisite financial capital. They argue that, while not exclusively bounded to the middle-classes, they are in part marketed in terms of both safety and expertise and serve to limit social mixing to a degree and are part of a social 'cocooning' of the child. Vincent and Ball note the increasing prevalence of a discourse of intensive parenting, within which both the market and the state frame ideals of 'good' and 'necessary'

parenting which are inculcated into the choices and decisions of middle class families,

‘The work of transmission of cultural capital really is work, ‘a labour of inculcation and assimilation’ as Bourdieu (2004, p.18) puts it. Effort is expended to ensure adequacy and advantage, to ensure the best for that child. It is an effort of endless responsibility, fuelled by the market, provoked by the state and driven by social competition in a context of social and technological risk.’ (Vincent and Ball, 2007, p.13-14)

Vincent and Ball conclude that, while their data may not provide any definitive answers on the role played by enrichment activities as an induction to ‘legitimate’ culture, they do imply the need for understandings of social class to be framed in the context of family practices.

This work supports Lareau’s (2002; 2011) research into social class and parenting in both black and white families in the USA. Her three-phase ethnographic study comprised interviews, school and family observations with a sample of 18 white and 18 black middle-class children, 14 white and 12 black working-class children, and 12 white and 14 black poor children. Lareau found that middle-class parents’ ‘cultural logic’ emphasized ‘concerted cultivation’ (deliberate and sustained efforts to cultivate children’s social and cognitive skills and stimulate children’s development) as opposed to childrearing strategies that emphasized the ‘accomplishment of natural growth’ among working-class and poor parents. Especially notable, and somewhat controversial, was Lareau’s finding that race had considerably less importance than social class in shaping approaches to childrearing. In terms of enrolment in organized enrichment activities, the greatest differences were seen across social class and not ethnic groups. Whilst both middle-class black and middle-class white parents engaged in practices of ‘concerted cultivation’, Lareau pointed out that as the black children grow up and encounter greater racial

segregation in the wider world their ethnicity will likely become more central in their everyday lives.

More recent UK-based work has questioned how analytically productive it is to foreground race or class as more influential, and rather argued for consideration of how they (along with gender) intersect in particular times and contexts. Vincent, Rollock, Ball and Gillborn (2013) have suggested that 'concerted cultivation' may serve as a defence for middle-class black families against being positioned as marginal and less deserving or capable than white families. 62 parents (primarily mothers) who self-defined as Black Caribbean and were categorized as middle-class in terms of occupation, income, education, housing and parental investment in enrichment activities were interviewed. Vincent et al. (2013) argued that attempts to establish a 'hierarchy of oppression' are futile, and that racial identity, experiences and awareness of racism in society inform every aspect of childrearing. In being both a classed parenting strategy and a racialised one 'concerted cultivation' is a rather more complex story of privilege than Lareau's work suggested,

'The activities in which children are involved are both a mechanism of distinction from the working-classes and a mechanism for sustaining and equipping Black children to live in a racist society'. (p.20)

In a recent study, Dermott and Pomati (2016) used measures from the 2012 UK Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) survey to examine how parenting practices classed popularly and politically as 'good' relate to economic disadvantage, time pressure and education. The survey covered 5,193 households and 12,097 people, from which a smaller sample of 1,665 cases of all households living with one or more dependent children aged 16 or under. They measured three leisure activities foregrounded in recent policy and academic research as positive – playing games (Field, 2010; Paterson, 2011); regularly playing sports (Department of Health, 2011); and television viewing (Sullivan, Ketende, & Joshi, 2013; Sullivan, 2001). They also included a question relating to

frequency of parents and children eating together, as family meals have both been framed as driving family togetherness (Brannen, O'Connell, & Mooney, 2013), and have been valorized (Gillies, 2011). Despite apparent hyperbole around the extent of a genuine reduction in family meal times (Jackson, 2008), an alleged decline in this activity has been foregrounded as a contemporary concern both in the UK, and even more so in other national contexts, such as Japan. In light of the recent focus on poor parenting and 'a lack of proper upbringing' as the root cause of the English riots of 2011, the authors usefully chose practices that do not only apply to the early years, but to older children and teenagers also. An at-risk-of-poverty variable was included, as was a measurement of education – the highest qualification of those responding to parenting questions. Time pressured parents were identified in the PSE according to seven or more 'time crunch' items, and two measures of household employment were also included to get a picture of the time commitments' of parents to paid work. Dermott et al. (2016) conclude that their study confirms the cultural dominance of a discourse of 'Intensive parenting' involving a narrow conceptualisation of 'good' parenting practice. They argue compellingly for their quantitative findings as an important counter to the currently dominant media and political discourse positioning 'problem parents' and 'troubled families' in need of 'fixing', and suggest they support recent research that contemporary 'good' parenting involves particular affiliation to a certain way of raising children (Faircloth & Lee, 2010). Indeed, these findings suggest associations made between poverty, poor parenting, and low levels of education are less based on empirical evidence, and rather more ideologically driven. They found political claims that poor or less educated families do not engage in currently high profile 'good' parenting practices that their measures were based on were misplaced. Furthermore, Dermott et al. (2016) suggest that the dominant discourse that poor people are poor at parenting may relate to the 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2011) activities of an educationally advantaged minority being accepted as the standard against which all others are evaluated. A calling into question of the conflation of high profile and 'good' parenting is advocated, involving a critical engagement

with what is being measured and its possible impact on our understanding of relationships. Dermott et al. (2016) suggest that a move away from future-oriented, individualised frameworks that limit how we understand and articulate what it means to be a parent in the present would be a richer language in which to speak about parenting (Raemaekers & Suissa, 2011). My study's qualitative focus on particular parenting practices and identities through narrative contributes to this richer language.

### 'Intensive parenting'

In their qualitative longitudinal study Shirani, Henwood and Colthart (2012) interviewed 16 men from the South Wales area between the ages of 15 and 40 about the transition to fatherhood. The study is noteworthy as it explores parenting culture from a relational perspective, rather than from an exclusively maternal viewpoint, considering the ways in which mothers and fathers may influence one another's parenting. By moving away from a specifically maternal lens Shirani et al. argue they are able to examine how embedded patterns of gender differentiation may be reinforced or destabilised within parenting relationships. Appropriating Hays (1996) concept of 'intensive mothering', 'Intensive parenting' is framed as growing out of the dominant cultural ideology of neoliberalism – which Shirani et al. frame as acquiring the status of a 'grand narrative' upheld by post-Thatcher Conservative and New Labour governments. They argue that by emphasizing individual responsibility and self-management, neoliberalism carries the tacit expectation that parents, predominantly mothers, adhere to a strictly child-centred parenting project that expends increasing amounts of emotional resources and time. This puts undue pressure on parents and pitches them into competition with one another in achieving the best outcomes for their children. So diffuse is this notion of parenting as a project, it is argued, that it can lead to poor parenting being foregrounded as the primary cause of numerous social ills, obscuring more foundational factors such as social economic status and gender.

Shirani et al.'s findings suggest that this culture of intensive parenting may reinforce traditional gender roles in parenting. While motherhood was still associated with the traditional role of hands-on care, 'providing' was found to be the strongest marker of fatherhood identity. Men were overwhelmingly committed to an involved model of fathering while still displaying gendered identities as parents. Of particular note is that men expressed more confidence in their abilities as caregivers than their partners and were sceptical of discourses of intensive parenting. Participants felt that their partners relied too heavily on expert advice and peer-to-peer forums on the Internet, understanding such advice discourses as increasing mothers' anxieties. Shirani et al. suggest that counter-discourses related to care-giving were drawn on by their sample; For example, fathers appeared to rely on more traditional, 'common sense' approaches to parenting and felt more easily assured about 'doing my best'. This was seen as due to men being more able to draw on resources of masculinity which value autonomy and competition, thus 'insulating them against some of the vulnerabilities apparently faced by mothers.' (p.36) Conversely, men expressed more anxiety than women around financial provision, even those whose partners also worked full-time understanding their primary responsibility as providing. Other research on paternal subjectivity has dismissed uncritical celebration of 'new fatherhood' as a new hegemonic ideal and a cultural fallacy, even prime-carer fathers describing their attachment to their child as a 'maternal bond' (Coltart & Henwood, 2012; Dermott, 2008).

#### 2.2.4: Studies of motherhood and experts

##### 'Expert' discourses in parenting manuals

Through a discourse analysis of childcare and parenting manuals Marshall (1991) argued that their cumulative effect is to construct one version of the meaning of motherhood as defined by medical and psychological professionals. Marshall argues that infancy is constructed as the prime site and critical period for intervention because this is when

mothers have most contact with their children. The result of this is that mothers are positioned as ultimately responsible should children not attain certain prescribed goals at the right time. Furthermore, wider social ills can also be blamed on individual mothers. This version of motherhood positions *individual* mothers as the monitors of 'normal' development, that is itself assumed to be totally individualistic, and does not consider external social influences such as schools, television and other children. Marshall suggested that childcare manuals foregrounded a discourse of natural motherhood as ultimately and unproblematically fulfilling and as effortlessly taking its own course, whilst denying the possibility that 'natural' mothers may ever have negative feelings. The only negative feelings mentioned in manuals are a medicalised discourse of post-natal-depression that does not consider the potential relationship between depression and social environment or life changes such as giving up work and associated loss of independent identity. 'Good mothering' is limited to three accounts according to advice manuals, she argues: flexibility; happy families; and sharing the caring. These represent a troubling and potentially contradictory relationship between motherhood as lived experience and as it is constructed by experts, with mothers expected to understand and take on board the prescriptions of psychological experts while also following their maternal instincts. In constructing mothers' experiences in accordance with a narrow essentialist 'expert' version of motherhood, Marshall (1991) argued that collectivity among mothers is undermined and women are encouraged to position themselves within distinct cultures of childrearing which may perpetuate social inequality.

In a more recent comprehensive study of modern motherhood, Thomson et al. (2011) found practices of consumption and maternal identity to converge in participants' narratives, suggesting the creation of distinct cultures of childrearing that may compound and inflate socio-economic differences. They argue that the plethora of expert advice on parenting should be understood as 'a commentary on the impossibility of getting motherhood "right"' (p.16). Narrative interviews were carried out with 62 women traversing the journey to first-time motherhood, from



conception to birth, with 12 case studies selected for closer analysis. Drawing on British Cultural Studies perspectives, Thomson et al. (2011) conceptualised motherhood as a bodily situation subjectively framed through lived experience in common cultures. This biographical perspective illuminates both the differences and points of intersection in the lives of a diverse sample in age, class and ethnicity. Whilst this study focused on several aspects of maternal culture, including work, relationships and commodities, particularly noteworthy here is Thomson et al.'s analysis of their sample's experiences of expert advice. In keeping with their narrative methodology the material selected to be analysed from their data was that which women had signposted as important for *them*. What this material might represent as part of wider contemporary mothering was then considered. Whilst the proliferation of advice, from best-selling books to local and digital resources, ostensibly offers women more 'choice', Thomson et al. (2011) argue it may also create more pressure through the commercialization of domestic space which leads to a re-evaluation of what mothers are able to achieve.

New mothers in their sample engaged with expert advice in a variety of ways to negotiate their pathway into motherhood. The two advice books that featured most in their accounts were Gina Ford's *The Contented Little Baby Book* (1999), the most popular contemporary babycare manual that reinstated the importance of imposing routine (Hardyment, 2007), and Tracy Hogg's *The Baby Whisperer* (1988), which takes a more child-centred approach. Thomson et al. (2011) argue that the popularity of these two particular books amongst their sample is emblematic of the contradictions and strains of wider contemporary mothering culture,

'There is a sense in which these two texts exist in conversation for contemporary mothers – revealing the strains of working motherhood and contributing to a form of intensification that combines the lingering spectres of the rejecting and the over-protective mother. ... it makes sense for women to imagine themselves as the maternity nurses

that they cannot afford, consuming contradictory advice which echoes powerfully with their own experiences of being parented, as well as fantasies of social mobility.’ (Thomson et al. 2011, p.136)

But, whilst women reported affinities with particular childcare experts, Thomson et al. (2011) found that many also built up their own local networks for support and advice, generating ‘a personally blended and contextually specific form of expertise ... suited to their experience and personal circumstances’ (p.137). This involved for some the establishment of connections with groups such as the National Childbirth Trust, and valuing the advice of their family and friends who had children – to build a community around them they could trust emotionally. Notably many women’s own mothers were cited as vital to the development of their maternal identity – even if often they were framed as more emblematic of how they did not want to mother. Those in their sample who explicitly constructed motherhood as a project of self had well developed narratives about the type of mother they wanted to be – this involved drawing on popular cultural resources, even if ironically. Women often framed the ‘choices’ available to them as involving binary divides – for example natural vs medical births, or child-centred vs adult-centred parenting (the choice between Gina Ford’s and Tracy Hogg’s books exemplifies this). Although women of all backgrounds and ages strategically drew on what Thomson et al. (2011) call ‘the common culture of mothering’, 26-35 year olds had more tendency to position themselves relative to these binary distinctions. They argue that

‘... age has become an organizing category through which normative notions of mothering are constituted, with a powerful discourse of efficient biographical planning incorporating social class and mediating differences of sexuality, ethnicity and disability.’ (p. 149)

To demonstrate this Thomson et al. (2011) discuss a case study of a 31-year-old middle-class mother-to-be who uses books to imagine her way into becoming a mother and to experiment with the ways distinctive mothering cultures encode social class. Conversely, younger mothers were found to read pregnancy magazines and books less, instead drawing from soap operas, celebrity culture, friends and family to make sense of their situation.

Particularly noteworthy in relation to my work is what Thomson et al. describe as a contemporary shift in the relationship between experts and mothers, with opportunities for the 'display' of maternal ambivalence increasing further through online communities such as Mumsnet. Rather than simply a technical engagement with the goal of fact-finding, they argue that mothers' engagement with expert advice is part of the process of positioning and constructing the self within maternal culture.

#### Expert parenting advice on television

Televised forms of expert parenting advice have been found to operate in different ways to traditional advice texts. Using 'a textual analysis method' Jensen (2010) examined the popular television parenting advice show 'Supernanny'<sup>2</sup>. In particular, she explored how the genre reproduces the concept of 'poor parenting', arguing that nineteenth century debates about the habits of the poor have shifted from concerns of survival to concerns of quality. Jensen argues these debates are the foundation for a current preoccupation with cultural facets of parenting, as well as social inequalities that televised parenting advice is called on to account for. Applying Rose's (1997) concept that the 'therapeutic culture of the self' has led to difficulties becoming framed only through the prism of the psychological – or what he has termed the discourse of 'Psy' - Jensen argues that,

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<sup>2</sup> The 'Supernanny' programme ran over seven series between 2003 and 2012. Jensen (2010) cites the first series produced for Channel 4 by Ricochet Productions.

‘... parenting television only ever employs psychological vocabularies in order to both diagnose and treat parenting malaise. Parents are asked, ‘what kind of parent are you, right now?’ This apparently open question can only be answered within these narratives in one way; in terms of their psychological wellbeing. Material lives are absent from the televising of poor parenting and good parenting; similarly, the question ‘what are the conditions in which you are parenting, right now’ seems uninteresting, or perhaps not dramatic enough for the drama of makeover. The two ends of this spectrum are visible only in terms of psychological health, reflection, resolve and technical competence.’ (Jensen, 2010, p.179)

Whereas parenting manuals and magazines provide more generalized and hypothetical advice according to patterns of likelihood, the medium of the screen promises the viewer will be shown the immediate impact of parenting practices. For example, mother Debbie – the subject of one show – is berated by the voiceover for asking her parents to help her settle her children at bedtime – while the ‘consequences’ of eschewing Supernanny’s expert advice are shown onscreen through a montage of her children throwing toys and tantrums the next day. Jensen’s work is notable in looking beyond the content of the advice and examining its form. Through this she argues compellingly that the expertise extolled through the multimodal medium of television has a more panoptic and individualising quality than more monomodal texts. ‘Parenting’ becomes imbued with ‘...a consequential power that is difficult to refute in these intersections between visual evidence and explanatory voiceover’ (p.184).

She concludes by arguing that parenting is becoming a key site for the substitution of class with identity,

‘The (problematic) habits of those marked as ‘poor parents’

are, in Supernanny, recast as only ever psychological – a marker of pathology, certainly, but importantly, a pathology that is surmountable, through the right expertise and labour.’ (p.188).

Jensen’s work is important and highly informative in relation to my study in its refusal to simply accept the proliferation of apparently polyvocal parenting advice as innocuous in the contemporary age of consumer choice. All parents are presumed to have freedom of choice when there may be little or none. In line with Jensen, I frame parenting practices and identities through a psychosocial lens as it enables the discursive foundations of ‘parenting’ to be questioned, both in terms of the psychological (‘psy’) and the complex material – social – realities where subjects live out their lives.

### 2.3: Review of literature on Parents’ use of the Internet

This section focuses on literature regarding parents’ use of parenting websites. To begin with, I will give a brief historical overview of parenthood and the Internet, including a broad overview of the findings of a recent literature review relating to parenthood and the Internet and two systematic reviews of online peer and professional support for parents. I then focus in greater depth on key studies that relate specifically to a central theme of my thesis – namely parents’ experiences of using parenting websites and ideological aspects thereof.

To place popular parenting websites in the historical context of social support for parents, I will first again turn briefly to the work of childcare advice historian Christina Hardyment (2007). She frames the increasingly universal use of mobile phones and the advent of Web 2.0 technology (social media) that has broadened the possibilities for contact between mothers over the Internet as an antidote to the anxiety brought on by the isolation of modern parenting. Naming Mumsnet and Netmums

as exemplifying the popularity of online parenting forums, she points out that they represent the latest development in

‘The line of mothers talking to each other about childcare (that) stretches back to the letters page of Mrs Beeton’s *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* in the 1850s through the early-twentieth-century Mothers’ Co-operatives, the columns of immensely popular *Nursery World* magazine between the 1920s and the 1980s... and the antenatal class groups of the late twentieth century. Collections of shared feminist maternal experiences were made into books in the 1970s: Ann Oakley’s *From Here to Maternity* (1976) and Boston Women’s Collective’s *Ourselves and Our Children* (1976). (p. 305-306)’

While emphasizing the feeling of comfort and sense of belonging of sharing and reading about others’ parenting experiences online, Hardyment also recognises parenting information on the Internet as containing ‘usually very definite, though often not explicit, assumptions... as well as contradictions galore’ (p.306). Certainly, popular websites for parents develop their own discursive formations and collective identities, which may speak to classed identities, as surely as the ‘shared feminist maternal experiences’ Hardyment (2007) cites do.

### 2.3.1: Literature reviews of parenting and the Internet

There have been three recent reviews of research on parenting and the Internet: i) a literature review of Parenthood and the Internet by Plantin and Danebak (2009); ii) a systematic review from the perspective of peer and professional targeted online support for parents (Nieuwboer, Fukkink, & Hermanns, 2013); and iii) another systematic review focusing only on peer-to-peer online support for parents (Niela-Vilén, Axelin, Salanterä, & Melender, 2014). In order to map out the broader field of literature I will

briefly summarise the key findings of these reviews, before covering key studies in greater depth.

Dutch researchers Nieuwboer, Fukkink, and Hermanns' (2013) and Finnish researchers Niela-Vilén, Axelin, Salanterä, and Melender's (2014) systematic reviews included 75 and 38 studies respectively. Of the 38 studies included in Niela-Vilen et al.'s (2014) integrative systematic review 20 were conducted in North America, five in Australia (with one a collaboration between Australia and U.S.A), four in Sweden, three in Finland, three in UK, one in Germany and one in Iceland. 16 of the studies focused on peer support between mothers only, 15 included both parents, and 7 studies focused on fathers. Nieuwboer et al. (2013) do not give explicit information on the country of origin for the studies reviewed. They identified a wide and increasing variety of types of support online for parents to engage in peer-to-peer support (e.g. Hall & Irvine, 2009) and consult professionals (e.g. Campbell-Grossman, Hudson, Keating-Lefler, & Heusinkvelt, 2009). It should be noted that Nieuwboer et al.'s (2013) search criteria came from a markedly different epistemological perspective to my own, which takes a more critical standpoint on contemporary notions of learnable and measurable parenting skills. Therefore, being especially focused on targeted forms of online parent support resources often delivered by health and social care professionals and largely concerned with outcomes, the findings of this review are largely not relevant here. Given the focus of their review it is perhaps unsurprising that Nieuwboer et al. (2013) found a preponderance of web-based programs for parents of preschool aged children, with child health and support for pregnant and first-time parents as key topics.

Niela-Vilen et al.'s (2014) review is substantively and methodologically centred on Nursing Studies, focusing on outcomes of online groups and interventions for parents – albeit from the perspective of peer support rather than professional support per se. Sixteen of the 38 studies were based on interventions developed by researchers. As my study focuses on existing popular public parenting websites these are largely beyond the scope of this review. However, a notable theme that

arose in half of these studies is the importance placed on anonymous participation in online peer support groups for parents (e.g. Kouri et al. 2006). Niela-Vilen et al. (2014) argue it is easier for parents to discuss sensitive topics with an online pseudonym, but also suggest it may lead to more impulsive statements being made as there are less social repercussions.

More salient are the 22 studies reviewed by Niela-Vilen et al. (2014) that focused on pre-existing Internet peer-support groups, the main interest of these studies being the contents of peer discussions. These studies included topics and methods such as a qualitative study of 512 postings on online discussion groups for postpartum depression (Evans, Donelle, & Hume-Loveland, 2012), and the sharing of stories online by conducting a survey with 12 parents of premature babies (Morris & Bertram, 2013). Three main findings emerged from Niela-Vilen et al.'s (2014) review: i) The most important function of peer support on the Internet seemed to be for information, predominantly mothers seeking and sharing information based on their own experiences and other sources (Aho et al. 2012; Evans et al. 2012). Information on the Internet was considered more convenient and up-to-date than information from health professionals (O'Connor & Madge, 2004); ii) Online peer support groups were used as a forum for peer-to-peer knowledge (Hall & Irvine, 2009; Coulson & Greenwood, 2012). After receiving peer support from others, parents felt enabled to support other parents online (Stewart et al. 2011). Mothers used online peer support more than fathers - emotional support being a key gain, this included sharing experiences and feelings as well as displaying and expressing sympathy (eg. Evans et al. 2012; Aho et al. 2012; Drentea & Moren-Cross 2005), while men found affirmation of their identities as fathers (eg. Nystrom & Ohrling 2008); iii) For mothers, being a member of a social community was a key function of online peer support groups, and in particular the feeling that they were not alone in their situation (Sullivan 2008; Morris & Bertram, 2013). In some of the studies reviewed, parents were found to experience the lack of physical face-to-face contact entailed in peer support groups online as negative (Coulson & Greenwood 2012).



Swedish researchers Plantin and Danebak's (2009; Danebak & Plantin, 2008) literature review was somewhat more helpful than the narrower systematic reviews above, not least as the studies were usefully broken down into disciplinary areas. Inclusion criteria were that articles had to be peer-reviewed, in English, and focus on parent use of the Internet to seek support and information about pregnancy, babies/children and/or parenthood. Studies into use of the Internet by professionals to reach parents or expectant parents through both direct interventions such as online counselling and support groups in chat rooms were also included. They found 94 articles matching their inclusion criteria. Sixty of the articles were conducted in North America, 26 in Europe, and eight in Asia / Australia. The majority of the articles they found were published in the field of medicine (46), with social science studies coming in second at 27, followed by Health (seven) and Other (14). Notably, Danebak and Plantin (2008) state, '... the focus has often been on the parent-professional relation and less often on parent-parent relations (Danebak & Plantin 2008)'. In terms of timeframe, the review spans a period of 11 years - the first article cited being Anderson and Anderson (1997). Most articles were based on empirical research that had employed qualitative and quantitative approaches to a more or less equal extent. In analysing the content of these they identified four main themes: i) Website analysis; ii) User patterns; iii) Online support groups; and iv) Interventions.

Website analysis concerned studies involving descriptions of websites for parents and analyses of their relative quality and usefulness. For example, evaluations of websites for parents of particular groups of children such as those with disabilities or health conditions such as asthma (Anderson & Anderson, 1997; Oermann, Gerich, Ostosh, Zaleski, 2003; Rees 2002; Sankar, 2000). Indeed, studies in this theme predominantly related to medical conditions. A 'glut' of sometimes misleading and contradictory information online for parents was noted (Carter, 2007). A general need for professionals to help parents find good quality, accurate websites was found (Martland & Rothbaum, 2006; Oermann, Lowery, & Thornley, 2003), while some noted the medical

orientation of websites led to a lack of focus on the social and emotional baggage that some medical diagnoses bring, for example relating to infertility (Himmel, Kochen, & Michelmann, 2005). In terms of methodology the majority of these studies investigated between 10 and 30 websites, assessing the quality of the information found there. Specific diseases were generally the focus in terms of selection of the websites and information on them was framed comparatively with governmental guidelines. Also, similar parameters were often found in the assessing of quality – so there was a lack of diversity among these studies. Notably, studies under this theme were largely conducted prior to 2005, with a marked tendency for websites to be medically oriented. The preponderance of studies of one-way online information gathering, rather than communication per se, is arguably explicable here by the demarcation between Web 1.0 technology and later introduction of Web 2.0 technology (Page, 2012).

Most research within the second theme - user patterns – confirmed that many parents used the Internet to search for information and suggested that most considered it a helpful resource. The aim of studies in this theme was to investigate the accessing of online information about parenting and health – both what was searched for and how. The majority of these studies were conducted in offline settings and concerned health, sampling small numbers of specific patient groups. While some qualitative studies employing individual interviews and focus groups were found (e.g. Bernhardt & Felter, 2004), quantitative approaches dominated here (e.g. Cohall, Cohall, Dye, Dini, & Vaughan, 2004).

The third theme identified - online support groups – was the most salient to my study. In line with the advent of social media these articles were predominantly published in 2002 or later. This literature described online support groups as web communities, web chat rooms, and email lists wherein parents interacted peer-to-peer and occasionally with professionals. The majority of these groups were either created or initiated by professionals as parts of interventions and were often aimed at specific

groups, for example young single mothers and adolescent mothers (Dunham, Hurshman, Litwin, Gusella, Ellsworth, & Dodd, 1998; Valaitis & Sword, 2005; Hudson, Elek, Westfall, Grabau, & Fleck, 1999), pregnant women on home bed rest (Adler & Zarchin, 2002), and gay mothers (Lev, Dean, DeFillippis, Evernham, McLaughlin, & Phillips, 2005). Generally, parents framed the support they received in such online groups as positive and the advice as useful (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Gribble, 2001; Leonard, Slack-Smith, Phillips, & Richardson, 2004; Nystrom & Ohrling, 2006). Anonymity online was emphasized as important in enabling parents to express themselves freely and comfortably (Valaitis & Sword, 2005). It was generally agreed among researchers that participating in online communities or support groups led to positive outcomes for parents. Additionally, by participating in online support groups, professionals could gain instant feedback from those in their care that could improve maternity care (Kouri, Turunen, Tossavainen, & Saarikoski, 2006). However, some online support groups were found to reproduce traditional stereotypes leading the Internet to be framed as simultaneously liberating and constraining (Madge & O'Connor, 2006). In contrast to the studies in the previous themes, these studies were conducted online and often employed qualitative approaches aiming to analyse the content in a variety of online groups. Methods ranged from participant observation to questionnaires. Quantitative studies were relatively small, samples comprising less than 100 respondents. Whilst fathers were not entirely absent among these studies (eg. Nicholas, McNeil, Montgomery, Stapleford, & McClure, 2003), the dominant focus was on mothers.

The fourth theme Danebak and Plantin (2008) identified in the literature was Interventions. This theme is less salient to my study as I am not focusing on specific interventions. Methodologically most of these studies were either experimental in design, evaluating interventions by pre-test/post-test or post-test experiments (e.g. Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2006), or were literature reviews focused on how the Internet could be used for a variety of interventions (e.g. Card & Kuhn, 2006). Samples in these studies were generally small and were both randomised

and non-randomised and sometimes included a control group. Notably again, this type of research increased in 2005, suggesting a shift in the use of the Internet from one-way information seeking to more interactive two-way communication with the development of Web 2.0 platforms.

Ten percent of the articles reviewed by Danebak and Plantin (2008) concerned topics other than those comprising the four main themes. These included methodology (Beck, 2005; O'Connor & Madge, 2001), and narratives posted on the Internet by parents (Bylund, 2005; Christian, 2005; Fleischmann, 2004; Fleischmann, 2005; Ley, 2007).

Across all three reviews there was broad agreement that, while research into parenting and the Internet has increased exponentially since the first study into computer-mediated support for parents in the late 1990s (Anderson & Anderson, 1997), much research still concerns specific groups of parents and health conditions. The following section reviews key studies that address both ideological aspects of parenting websites and parents' experiences and understandings.

### 2.3.2: Key studies: Parents' experiences and understandings

While research into parenting and the Internet is a growing field there are still only relatively few studies that address ideological aspects of parent forums and / or are concerned with the meaning parent users attribute to their use of parenting forums. Because my study explores parents' discursive positioning online and their parenting identities and practices, particular attention will now be paid to key studies considering the ideological aspects of parenting websites and parents' experiences and understandings of their use of parenting websites. These studies were selected via systematic searches on databases Google Scholar, Sociological Abstracts, PsycINFO, and Web of Science. Search terms were extracted from my developing research questions – key terms included 'Parenting', 'Online', 'Identities', 'Gender', 'Narrative', 'Discourse', and 'Social support'. In turn, this field of literature informed my research

questions as the project evolved. The following section is ordered into subsections that pertain to the key studies under review: The gendering of parenting websites; Parenting forums as safe spaces: the value of anonymity and lurking; Alternative femininities; Ideological aspects of parenting forums; Maternal publics; Reproduction of digital divide.

### The gendering of parenting websites

As highlighted, research on parenting support in face-to-face contexts shows the term 'parenting' is often used as silently synonymous with 'mothering' (Edwards & Gillies, 2011). Mumsnet is a case in point here - while describing itself as being 'By parents for parents', its chosen name of 'Mumsnet' is pointed (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013). Although the majority of websites are described as 'parenting' communities, their users are overwhelmingly women. Even research into online parenting communities in Sweden, where explicit social policies exist to promote more involved fathering and gender equality is relatively high, found a lack of fathers both among parenting websites membership and respondents in related research. Sarkadi and Bremberg (2005) surveyed 2221 users of Sweden's most popular parenting website online over a one-week period. While their findings suggested that the medium of online support is socially unbiased – seemingly not following the pattern of the digital divide - 95% of respondents were women and the lack of fathers introduced an unexpected gender bias. The seeming lack of involvement and distancing from taking direct responsibility of fathers also suggests the continuance of traditional stereotypes online. Fathers have frequently been framed as inadequate sources of support in empirical studies. In Madge and O'Connor's work on UK-based Babyworld (2005; 2006), Rashley's study of the US website Babycenter (2005), and Brady and Guerin's (2010) research on an Irish parenting website mothering was predominantly framed as women's work online. Mothers were positioned as superior care-givers, and stay-at-home mothers favoured over those returning to work. However, research carried out into a Hong Kong based parenting website has suggested that such websites can offer working mothers

opportunities to perform maternal identities while separated from their children at work (Chan, 2008).

In Brady and Guerin's (2010) qualitative study of an Irish parenting website, the forum was seen as an exclusively female domain where the work done by women through both childbirth and childrearing was acknowledged. This led to an 'Us and Them' attitude being set up on the discussion board. Fathers were often framed as both an inadequate source of support and even pitied as lacking real understanding of childrearing. A thematic content-analysis of 763 threads on 29 parenting-related discussion boards on this website was carried out over a two-week period. Participants included all those who posted on these boards during this time, regardless of gender and age. To contextualise the findings from the forum semi-structured interviews of approximately half an hour in length were conducted with two female participants.

A key overarching theme was Gender Differences, both in attitudes towards parenting and within the forum itself. The role of the website in giving recognition to mothers' own expertise and knowledge – especially relating to pregnancy and childbirth – was understood by some as something of an antidote to medical experts and 'lofty theories in books' (p.21). This recognition served both to empower mothers in solidarity against an unfamiliar medical establishment and affirm their sense of self-worth. In light of this theme many users attempted to dispel the myth of motherhood by honestly presenting its negative as well as positive aspects. This theme was seen to further contribute to strengthening the sense of community on the website in removing secrecy around parenthood, creating a safe space for self-disclosure and reciprocity of peer-support. The results echoed Oakley's (1992) findings that social support during pregnancy both enhances women's well-being in the first year of motherhood and contributes to better health for their children seven years later (Oakley, Hickey, Rajan, & Rigby, 1996). In relation to the female dominance of the 'parenting' board, Brady and Guerin (2010) suggest that men may require separately named websites aimed specifically at fathers in order to benefit from online parenting support.

They argue that the creation of a space specifically for fathers within a 'parenting' website – as was the case on this Irish website – implies that 'parenting' in fact means 'mothering', so may contribute to furthering gender inequality by framing women unequivocally as prime caregivers. Notably, both Mumsnet and Netmums have dedicated threads for fathers, multicultural families, and LGBT parents. According to Brady and Guerin (2010), such arguably exclusionary categories may contribute to perpetuating traditional norms around gender, ethnicity and sexuality.

### Parenting forums as safe spaces: the value of anonymity and lurking

Other overarching themes found in Brady and Guerin's (2010) study were: Feelings towards the forum, a key aspect of this theme being the strong sense of community on the forum, leading users to frame it as a safe space and feel they were not alone. The forum was seen by many as a way to access information that did not necessarily require active participation by members – there are some who simply lurk and read for information and support rather than feel the need to post. The forum was often compared favourably with the 'real world' as somewhere where others truly identified with and understood difficult experiences such as stillbirths and miscarriages, whereas real-life friends and family are not always so readily available; this related to another key theme which permeates them all – anonymity. In being an anonymous form of support, the online forum was seen as especially conducive to discussing sensitive topics such as breastfeeding and enabling genuine honesty without fear of reproach or causing offence. By offering both anonymity in posting and the benefit of lurking on the boards for those who may not usually participate in face-to-face support groups, Brady and Guerin (2010) argue that online forums are arguably more widely accessible to all.

In a recent qualitative study comparing face-to-face support groups with use of the internet for information and advice by expectant first-time mothers, Johnson (2015) interviewed a group of twelve middle-class

women from Sydney Australia twice - once during the third trimester of their pregnancy and again when their babies were aged 3-7 months. The mothers ranged in age from 29-44. In support of other research, Johnson (2015) found the anonymity of online parenting websites was highly valued by those she interviewed (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Drentea & Moren-Cross 2005; Brady & Guerin, 2010). Drawing on Tardy's (2000) appropriation of Goffman's (1959) concept of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' in reference to motherhood, Johnson suggests these may be applied to parenting websites. These connected concepts denote the differing aspects of activity that occur in the presence of others (in the case of online forums, virtual). Frontstage denotes aspects of activity / experience that are accentuated in performance/expression to encourage the desired impression, while the backstage is the place where aspects suppressed in frontstage performance can be expressed. In Johnson's (2015) study, 'frontstage' refers to the normative ideal of the good mother and expectations surrounding motherhood, and 'backstage' to the open discussion of potentially taboo and contentious topics such as miscarriage. While some women in her study had been able to explore both the backstage and front stage of mothering in face-to-face groups, Johnson suggests this was not the case for them all. An overwhelming majority of her participants engaged from a distance with online communities, 'lurking' without posting themselves, taking part in what she characterizes as 'surreptitious support' both when pregnant and after becoming mothers. Examples of reasons given for this were time constraints, not wanting social 'chit-chat', not having the courage, and feeling that their questions had already been asked. Of those who did interact online, a difference was noted between engaging for social purposes and for solidarity in pregnancy and then more for practical advice and reassurance after having the baby. She concludes that the anonymity of the Internet can be a space of empowerment where the risk of potential embarrassment of sharing intimate details is reduced and women can collectively patch together their own versions of motherhood. Johnson's study supports the implication in Madge and O'Connor's (2006)



work that parenting websites are places where mothers can safely 'test' and legitimate new identities, especially in the transition to motherhood.

### UK-based online parenting studies

Notable UK-based studies into the use of online parenting forums have been carried out by Madge and O'Connor (2006) and Pedersen and Smithson (2010; 2013).

Madge and O'Connor (2006) framed their mixed-methods study of UK parenting website 'Baby World' in the context both of research suggesting that the disembodied practice of posting online may result in greater freedom to perform different and multiple identities - increased 'cyber-agency' for users (Davies, 2004; Pitts, 2004), and research emphasising an inevitable shaping of online interactions by existing social, cultural and bodily experiences of users (Hardey, 2002). They utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods in the form of virtual group interviewing and online surveys of users of the website 'Babyworld' to explore whether or not new mothers felt empowered by the Internet. 84% of the sample were women and 76% were under the age of 35. Use of the Internet was seen to play an important social role for some while simultaneously reinforcing unequal gender stereotypes. Madge and O'Connor concluded that the responses from the sample in this particular study suggest a degree of online hegemonic continuity with 'real-life' traditional family practices. However, they also point out that this may be due to the majority of participants being part of two-parent 'traditional family structures' (p.29), thus being more likely to adhere to 'normative' socially-regulated behaviour in their everyday lives. The anonymity afforded by the website was cited as offering users temporary relief from the power dynamics of new motherhood, enabling the potential for 'cyber-agency' and the transcendence of local moralities of mothering (Holloway, 1998). However, it was also suggested that it may be the anonymity of the Internet – where less visible markers of gender exist for example - that led to the reproduction of unreconstructed ideologies of parenting. Parenting

was discursively labeled as 'women's work' and fathers were subtly distanced from the responsibilities of childcare.

### Mumsnet and 'alternative femininities'

Both academic research into parenting websites and use of and engagement with the more popular of these sites by government agencies has increased in the last decade. In particular, Mumsnet, famously courted by politicians from all major parties during the 2010 general election, plays a major role in governmental policy campaigns and is considered to be a key stakeholder on children and sexualisation issues (Pederson & Smithson, 2013). Similarly, but distinctively, Netmums works in partnership with statutory agencies and the voluntary sector in the UK (Russell, 2006).

The most widely used parenting website in the UK is Mumsnet, generating over 70 million page views and over 14 million visits per month according to the 'About us' page at the time of writing. In their study evaluating members' engagement with and understanding of their use of Mumsnet, Pedersen and Smithson (2010) surveyed 391 respondents. They analysed online discussions between members using a combined approach of discourse analysis and virtual ethnography. Supporting the findings of previous studies (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Pedersen & Smithson, 2010) found that Mumsnet reproduced and reinforced power relations already existing in everyday life. Their findings suggest that particular norms and values appear to hold an important place within the specific community of Mumsnet. Examples they include are the high level of importance placed on posting in grammatically correct English rather than text-speak and the establishment of the status of 'expert' on the website relating to the real-world professional experience of members. It is suggested that this may reflect the forum's predominantly older and middle class profile (75% aged 31-50) than users of other parenting sites. Eighty percent of their sample also had one or two children, with only 22.8 percent having a child under the age of two, thus suggesting that

Mumsnet may be used over more prolonged periods of parenting than other websites that focus on the lead up to birth and the immediate aftermath and are often directly affiliated to baby products (e.g. Pampers, Bounty). The 2011 launch of affiliated website, Gransnet, is also suggestive of more prolonged use of Mumsnet.

Indeed, it may be the case that the growing popularity of Mumsnet has expanded its reach beyond only expectant parents and those with younger children. In further development of their work on Mumsnet Pedersen and Smithson (2013) suggest that the site has developed into being much more than only a website for parents. They argue that it is not primarily a parenting support website, but focuses rather on entertainment and offers women advice, debate and a place to compare experiences with other women. With the permission of Mumsnet Headquarters, an online survey was hosted on Mumsnet for a period of two months. As well as demographic data, questions were asked about motivations for using Mumsnet, what users enjoyed and what they disliked for example. Questions were also asked about users' behaviour on the website, relating to lurking, trolling, and leaving the website and discussions ('flouncing'). 391 responses were posted within the two-month period.

While acknowledging the findings of previous research that the website may reinforce middle-class parenting values (Pedersen & Smithson, 2010), they argue that its celebration of confrontational language and well-informed, opinionated, literate debate, enables its users to celebrate in its distinctiveness from other parenting websites. The results suggested that, while Mumsnet does provide (sometimes very robust) support and advice to its users, 'hedonic needs' (i.e. entertainment), as opposed to purely functional social and psychological needs (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Wang et al, 2002), were especially important to them. Pedersen and Smithson (2013) argue that the preponderance in their survey results of users wanting to 'have a good laugh' represents a new finding that has not been seen in previous literature on online parenting communities. The two favourite discussion board topics listed by respondents exemplified this motivation to be entertained – 'Chat' and 'Am I Being Unreasonable?' being voted as the

favourite discussion topics by 51% and 39% respectively. Additionally, in analysed forum discussions about these topics it was the potential for arguments that was pinpointed by users as the most entertaining aspect of them. Pedersen and Smithson argue this suggests that pleasure is taken in more aggressive online behaviours previously identified as male styles of Internet forum use (Gurak, 1999; Hall, 1996). Mumsnet users were also seen to define themselves as different from users of other parenting communities, in part because they offered a tougher, more *real* variety of support than the more 'fluffy' uncritical sympathy propagated on other websites, with Netmums in particular viewed as inferior. Citing the statistic that 40% of Netmums users come from families with low incomes (Russell, 2006), Pedersen and Smithson argue that Mumsnet's critical stance can be seen to reinforce normative ideals of middle-class mothering.

Whilst acknowledging that more research is needed into gendered communication styles online, overall findings of this study suggested that Mumsnet, as a women-dominated online community, may facilitate the display of a broader variety of communication styles and online behaviours than previous research implies. Pointing out that previous research on behaviours such as 'flaming' (a hostile interaction between internet users) has mainly focused on male or mixed-sex communities (Herring, 1993, 1996; Barak, 2005), Pedersen et al. (2013) suggest that the situation regarding aggressive online behaviours such as 'flaming' may not be simply explicable by a male/female division. A compelling argument is presented here that being called Mumsnet may belie one of the website's key functions of providing a forum for shifting gender norms online. Arguably this enables the performance of new alternative forms of femininity via digital communication.

### 2.3.3: Ideological aspects of parenting forums: neoliberal arguments

As neoliberalism is a contested concept I will briefly define it in the context of this project. Evans and Sewell (2013) distinguish four aspects of neoliberalism: i) as an economic theory emphasising 'the welfare-

maximising consequences of market exchange' (p. 36) that in its complex technicality is fully accessible only to professional economists; ii) as a political ideology foregrounding market fundamentalism and personal responsibility; iii) as a policy paradigm made up of policies increasing the role of markets in the regulation of economic life – the widespread adoption of which, to greater and lesser extents, by states across the world justifies the characterization of the last 3-4 decades as a neoliberal era; iv) The combination of the above three have contributed to the production of a neoliberal social imaginary celebrating self-reliance and entrepreneurship, lionizing personal wealth, and equating consumer satisfaction and the pursuit of self-interest with freedom. This social imaginary moulds the goals and behaviour of individuals whilst presenting neoliberal political ideology and paradigms as the natural order of things. It is the notion of a pervasive neoliberal social imaginary and its potential to influence parenting practices and identities that is salient to my project. Pertinent to the current study, Connell (2009) has described neoliberalism as the common sense of our era, for example linking the suffusion of discourses of performance management within the internal culture of business organizations with the invasion of commercial marketing messages into all spheres of life, including family relationships.

### Maternal publics

Another conceptual framing of what Pedersen and Smithson (2013) describe as the availability of 'alternative femininities' on Mumsnet is the view of such websites as feminist / maternal publics. Warner (2002) describes publics thus,

'... to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one's disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology.' (Warner, 2002, p. 10)

In a recent article arguing that the architecture of Mumsnet invites a particular voice of its users, founded on neoliberal discourses of choice, self-reflexivity and agency, Jensen (2013) states that 'Mumsnet contributes powerfully to an ideology of individualism in contemporary parenting culture.' (p.134) She draws on Gambles' (2010) account of Mumsnet as offering 'something of a feminist public (although not stating or claiming its feminist status) in which it is possible for the personal to be personal *and* political in (more) public-political ways' (p.229). Personal both because of the therapeutic *capacity* the online medium affords to make public what might be regarded as personal/private in other contexts, and the *content* itself – which often relates intimate experiences about parenting and pregnancy. Gambles (2010) frames Mumsnet as political due to the strong campaigning aspects of the website which are mobilised through personal disclosures and webchats with politicians on the discussion forum, for example in fighting for better care after miscarriage. Drawing on her own experiences of using the website after experiencing a number of miscarriages Gambles writes about how people on the website are encouraged to 'go public' with their feelings – albeit anonymously. Whilst in one sense this coheres with the classic radical feminist ethos that the personal is political (Hanisch, 1969), Gambles argues that Mumsnet also operates as a *privatising* public. Citing Gill (2007) - 'the personal is politicised in such a way that every issue is reframed in individualistic terms erasing any sense of social and political' (p.230) - Gambles suggests that in expecting that articulations be *necessarily* therapeutic and self-empowering Mumsnet may separate rather than integrate personal problems with the public-political realm. Thus, following Orgad's (2005) argument in her research of online interactive communication amongst those with breast cancer, Gambles suggests that - while undoubtedly a supportive space for many – Mumsnet risks re-privatising the very issues they speak of.

Jensen (2013) builds on Gambles' (2010) work in arguing that while Mumsnet remains a potentially generative space for assembling a maternal public formed of collective declarations, it is currently a site of the performance of unevenly distributed and multiple kinds of privilege.

Although the reproduction of discourses of classlessness in the website's 'netiquette' and presumption of equal footing in their strapline – 'by parents for parents' - renders such privilege officially unspeakable, Jensen argues that the 'individualized, fragmented and deeply emotional toxicity of contemporary parent politics often explodes onto the Mumsnet discussion board'. (Jensen, 2013, p.142)

In the previously cited Australian study comparing 12 middle-class expectant mothers' experiences of face-to-face support groups with use of the internet, Johnson (2015) acknowledges Jensen's (2013) argument that the architecture of online parenting communities may emphasise prevailing neoliberal discourses. However, she sets aside these critiques of online parenting communities, which currently require more support from the findings of empirical research, to consider the more positive potential these spaces provide for collective politics that may subvert the existing social norms of motherhood. Using the term 'intimate mothering publics' to denote both face-to-face support groups and online forums Johnson (2015) argues these are potentially generative spaces where dominant discourses of 'good mothering' can be challenged and medical knowledge is not necessarily privileged above individual stories and experiential forms of knowledge. In doing this she draws on the notion of 'subaltern counterpublics', defined by Fraser (1990) as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.' (cited in Johnson, 2015, p. 239). Johnson stops short of definitively characterising communities of mothers – including online forums – as counterpublics, as she states that the publics she refers to in her paper do not position themselves in opposition to either normative ideals of parenting or its public definition. For this reason, she prefers the term "intimate publics' as a useful way to consider the meaning-making practices, sharing and learning experiences that occur during online interactions' (p. 240). The notion of '(virtual) *intimate* mothering publics' is useful as it emphasises the fact that, while publically

searchable/viewable, these may typically be constituted as private by the wider public sphere.

The key limitations to this study are firstly the lack of diversity in her sample. Comprising twelve middle-class mothers from Sydney her participants were more likely to hold and report received classed ideals and expectations of motherhood. There is also a lack of clarity over whether she is discussing online or face-to-face groups at times and she gives no detail about the online parenting forums under discussion, although arguably this may be reflective of the decreasing boundary between online and offline existence.

### Reproduction of digital divide

While some studies have shown parenting websites to bridge the 'digital divide' by, for example, offering support to lone parents and those with lower levels of education and income (Dunham et al., 1998; Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005), they have also been found to reproduce offline divisions of ethnicity, social class, gender and sexuality online (Rashley, 2005; Worthington, 2005; Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Brady & Guerin, 2010; Pedersen & Smithson, 2010).

In a mixed-methods study using participant observation and discourse analysis, Drentea and Moren-Cross (2005) sampled 180 mothers who used a mothering website. Social capital was defined as 'resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions' (Lin 2001, cited in Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, p. 29). In this case the social structure was the virtual community, which actors accessed to acquire resources, and then acted in response to resources acquired. It was found that social capital could be maintained on a mothering message board of an online parenting community through the provision of informal and formal emotional and instrumental support, and community building. In providing a means for instrumental and emotional support from a more heterogeneous group than could ever be found in one person's network ties, Drentea and Moren-Cross (2005) argue that the website became a place where mothers' social capital was



enhanced. However, a caveat remains that it was still seen to produce social capital for those mothers with existing financial and cultural capital – a more homogeneous group. They also point out that the website operated as both a feminine circle of support (Oakley, 1992) where, for example, women could find empowerment in an anonymous self-help group instead of simply accepting established medical viewpoints, and as a mechanism of inequality where parenthood was reinforced as women's work through hours spent reading and writing about mothering. Recent work using narrative approaches to examine family food blogs suggests that this activity - often hailed as emancipatory for mothers - may in fact also serve as a form of mothering work (Elliott, O'Connell, & Squire 2014).

In another narrative study, Ley (2007) carried out an online ethnography of the development of commitment in US-based online parent support forum, 'Coming up Roses', which was formed by a group of 100 women upon leaving pregnancy and mothering forum, 'Stork Talk', that she had joined herself. As she was a longtime contributor to the forum, the site's moderator set up a separate forum dedicated to Ley's project where interview questions and discussion topics were posted. As well as reading and analyzing users' messages, profiles, and signatures on the forum, Ley carried out 16 email interviews with administrators, moderators and users. The social and technical design of the website were also examined. Commitment was seen to function as an important feature of online social capital and as vital to the therapeutic capability of online parent support groups. The importance of receiving information and support while passing through life changing stages of conception, pregnancy and the transition to motherhood was a key narrative arising from this study. The architecture of the website was largely found to facilitate commitment, in particular by starting from scratch and creating a small intimate community it was felt to be a safe and secure space by the users. In other ways the site's small sized community had its drawbacks, for example existing users feared disruption to the close-knit dynamic when new users joined. Ley concludes by emphasizing the importance of both researchers and site administrators to maintain consideration of the

multiple contexts which shape everyday use of online parent support groups.

A recent article focusing on the Swedish parenting forum, 'The Parent Place', discussed the possibility that resources such as time in general, time on a specific forum, and experience with Internet technology may be more pertinent as the Internet is increasingly accessible to a wider range of social groups (Alstam, 2013). Whilst the minimal specific details given regarding the study's design – sample, methods etc - render this paper arguably of more theoretical interest than empirical, Alstam's (2013) in-depth narrative analysis of a forum conversation make it noteworthy here. The conversation concerns one user (Mabel) excitedly stating that her grown-up son is about to spontaneously apply for a job - her nervousness about this, to which another user (Zero+Zero) intimates that he should be expected to be independent rather than being wholly and comfortably supported by his mother. This conversation builds as Zero+Zero refers to previous posts regarding helping her son as evidence of Mabel's overly protective style of mothering and Mabel defends herself against the accusations. Alstam (2013) argues that two discourses of motherhood are drawn on here: First, 'the sacrificial mother' – who is omnipresent and whose love is without end; Second, 'the limit-setting mother' – who prioritises regulating child behaviour, evaluating maturity levels - punishing and rewarding accordingly - and making a citizen out of one's grown-up child. Alstam argues,

'In the forum, it is vital to narratively manage both themes in order to receive status, to avoid attack by others and to anticipate rewards such as laughter, praise or recognition. If a writer has problems in living up to the image of the sacrificial mother, she cannot compensate by doing better with the idea of the limit-setting mother – they both have to be mastered. These themes are also read as vital since they hold something more: a desirable subject position.' (2013, p.43)

The act of storing up the content of others' previous postings, then subsequently bringing them back up at opportune moments in order to project criticism onto them is framed as a skill that requires a level of time investment and 'know-how' about a given web forum and its users. This leads Alstam to conclude that '... a divide of rhetorical accountability' exists on The Parent Place forum

'... which makes the wrongdoings of some stand out and other misdemeanours vanish. The problem area seems to have moved from a divide in terms of access towards one that relates more to acquired skills in handling the social and discursive context that faces the user once she has entered the forum.' (p. 48)

While there are clear limitations of drawing conclusions from one online conversation, which are acknowledged by Alstam (2013), the notion of a more nuanced digital divide representing social divisions other than only internet access is pertinent to consider here. Her argument that both 'diverse access to' and 'creative handling of' linguistic resources leading to a certain 'rhetorical competence' is required to successfully post on The Parent Place can be extended to ask whether particular online parenting forums produce particular rhetorical discursive expectations from those who choose to post on them. While Alstam's (2013) work follows Eriksson and Bremberg (2008) in framing online parenting forum use as an established phenomenon in parental practice in the west, it is limited in only focusing on one instance of interaction on one parenting website.

#### 2.4: Summary

While previous reviews found literature on parenting and the Internet to still be in its infancy, research into peer-to-peer online communities for parents is now relatively burgeoning.

Several main themes were identified in my literature review:

- i) Online parenting forums as source of parenting information, professional advice:

The most important function of peer support on the Internet seemed to be for information, predominantly mothers seeking and sharing information based on their own experiences and other sources. While previous reviews show an initial emphasis on research on specific groups with particular health conditions, with professional advice being predominant rather than research into parent-parent communication, this has shifted somewhat. Connected to this, some research has shown non-medical and non-professional advice to be valued as much as more official health and parenting support information online.

- ii) Gendering of parenting forums:

Although the majority of websites are described as 'parenting' communities, their users are still overwhelmingly women. This echoes research into parenting support in face-to-face contexts that argued that parenting as lived experience is neither genderless nor classless. Mothers used online peer support more than fathers, with emotional support being a key gain - sharing experiences and feelings as well as displaying and expressing sympathy. Research applying a relational lens rather than predominantly maternal has found that gendered parenting identities remained pervasive in spite of practical arrangements (Shirani et al., 2012). This indicates that wider social and ideological structures play a key role in the construction of parenting identities.

iii) Parenting forums as safe spaces where anonymity is prized:

The anonymity of online communication was emphasized as important in enabling parents to express themselves freely and comfortably. This was seen as especially conducive to women wanting to discuss sensitive topics such as breastfeeding and as enabling genuine honesty without the fear of reproach or causing offence.

Women were seen to use parenting websites as safe spaces where identities could be 'tested' – particularly in the transition to new motherhood (Madge & O'Connor 2006).

A common theme connected to anonymity was that across studies the practice of using online parenting forums helped women feel less isolated in the experience of motherhood.

The benefits of remaining anonymous extended beyond those who actively post online – the affordance the Internet offers people to lurk in the background and receive support surreptitiously also being important. This offers potentially wider access in supporting those who may not usually participate in face-to-face support groups due to lack of anonymity.

It should be noted that this review spanned literature from a period of over a decade. Within this timeframe both the nature of the internet and attitudes towards it have inevitably changed somewhat. For example, social media is a more taken-for-granted part of everyday life than it was a decade ago, the boundary between online and offline worlds becoming increasingly blurred.

iv) Parenting websites and alternative femininities: maternal publics:

Recent research into Mumsnet suggests that one of the website's key functions is provision of a forum for shifting gender norms online, enabling the performance of new alternative forms of femininity via digital communication (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013).

Connected to this is the concept of maternal publics. Recent work has discussed parenting forums – Mumsnet in particular - as holding the potential to generate an empowering feminist maternal collective (Gambles, 2010; Jensen, 2013). However, it has been argued that Mumsnet is currently a site of the performance of unevenly distributed and multiple kinds of privilege (Jensen, 2013).

The appropriation of this concept as 'virtual *intimate* mothering publics' in recent empirical work (Johnson, 2015) is useful as it emphasises the fact that, while publically searchable / viewable, these may typically be constituted as private by the wider public sphere.

v) Ideological aspects of parenting forums: neoliberal arguments and the complexity of the digital divide:

Rather than necessarily signaling an end to those with power and capital hoarding expert advice, it has been argued that peer-to-peer parenting websites may emphasise prevailing neoliberal discourses. For example, rather than transcending the power dynamics of gender, class and ethnicity, these may be reshaped and embedded in the very architecture of websites (Jensen, 2013).

Recent research into ideological aspects of parenting forums (Alstam, 2013) has argued that the digital divide is not only about access to digital resources but also relates to acquired social and discursive skills, as well as 'know-how' about the context of a particular forum.

### My contribution

My study contributes to extending research on parenthood and the Internet beyond particular groups and medical conditions to include parents in non-clinical everyday settings (Danebak & Plantin, 2008). There is arguably no more 'everyday setting' in the landscape of contemporary parenting in the UK than that of popular parenting forums such as Mumsnet and Netmums, and yet there is still little research into parents' own understandings of their everyday practices and identities in relation to these spaces. Taking seriously the notion that websites such as Mumsnet have positioned themselves as havens from parenting experts (Joffe & Roberts, 2011) requires that research keep apace with this.

My thesis approaches the topic of parenting and the Internet from an epistemological standpoint that differs from much of the research that takes for granted instrumental outcome-driven notions of 'parenting' and social support. Extending Jensen's (2010) work, I will argue for the importance of qualitatively examining both the psychological (construction of parenting identities) and the social realities where lives are lived out (everyday parenting practices). Rather than accepting the presumption of free consumer choice with regard to popular parenting websites, my thesis frames them as potentially powerful discursive environments. Focusing on parenting practices and identities I want to explore the meanings that the practice of using popular parenting websites holds for individual users and what this may say about these websites' discursive foundations. Following Thomson et al. (2011) my study will pay particular attention to how participants position themselves in relation to these discourses both in the context of given popular websites for parents and wider parenting culture.

By researching the narratives of a small sample of users from *two* popular websites - Mumsnet *and* Netmums - my study builds on Pedersen and Smithson's (2013) work in which they focus on Mumsnet. Interviewing the founders and managers of both websites in my study also enables a more in-depth exploration of the discursive formations foregrounded in different online spaces and how these may intertwine with everyday parenting identities and practices.

I want to extend Vincent and Ball's (2007) work on classed parenting practices into exploring the ways in which popular online parenting websites may be classed and gendered. As Alstam (2013) does, my thesis frames the use of online parenting forums as a social practice. But by conducting both email and face-to-face interviews with mothers about their understandings and experiences of using particular popular parenting forums (in Chapter 6) I am able to explore it further across more than one context. Interviewing participants also enables me to get at those who may gain support through lurking on the websites but never or rarely post on the forum. Alstam's (2013) argument that both 'diverse access to' and 'creative handling of' linguistic resources leading to a certain 'rhetorical competence' is required to successfully post on The Parent Place can be extended in my study to ask whether particular online parenting forums – in this case Mumsnet and Netmums - produce particular rhetorical discursive expectations from those who choose to post on them.

A lack of in-depth qualitative studies of experiences and understandings of parenting forums from the perspective of users has also been identified in the literature (Niela-Vilen et al., 2014). Deploying a narrative approach in analysing the practices and identities of individuals who use the websites, my study also makes an important contribution towards filling this methodological gap.

The main research questions for my study are:

- i) What are the dominant discourses around which the websites are organised?



- ii) What narratives of 'parenting' and social support on the websites are foregrounded by the founders?
- iii) How did mothers who were users of Mumsnet and Netmums narrate their experiences of motherhood and their use of the websites?

## **Chapter 3: Concepts and Methods**

In the first section of this chapter I will describe the evolution of my project and explain the epistemology underpinning it. I then discuss my research questions and outline my theoretical framework, linking the conceptual tools I deployed and the research design to those questions and defining key terms. The final section of the chapter details the design of my study and the methods I applied at each stage.

### **3.1 Initial ideas**

As with many a qualitative, ethnographically-flavoured project the design of mine underwent some necessary and unexpected changes as it developed. I will expand upon the outline given in Chapter One, as there was considerable conceptual and methodological recalibration along the way. Initially, my design had been to compare narratives of mothers and fathers seeking social support in online contexts with seeking support in face-to-face contexts. The research was designed in three phases with two main research questions: i) In what ways do mothers and fathers seek support online and face-to-face? ii) What is the role of increasingly available mobile technologies in everyday parenting identities and practices? The three phases and respective research questions were planned as follows:

#### **Phase One – A Multimodal discourse analysis of the homepages and frameworks of two parenting websites**

##### ***Research questions:***

- What are the dominant discourses around which the websites are organised?
- In what ways are the websites constructed around gender, class, racialisation and sexuality?

- How far are discourses of top-down professional ‘knowledge’ about ‘parenting’ visible in parenting websites?

I carried out an initial multimodal discourse analysis of a sample of webpages from one popular website nominally aimed at mothers – Mumsnet, and one nominally aimed at fathers – Dad.info.

### **Phase two – Normative understandings of ‘parenting’ practices and identities in online forums**

#### ***Research Questions:***

- How far do participants’ discussions on the web forums reflect normative discourses of parenting?
- How do participants suggest they exercise agency as parents through their use of discussion forums?
- In what ways are online discussions of parenting gendered, racialised, classed?
- Do online discussions relate to the potential meanings and dominant discourses drawn out in the first phase of the study?
- How do participants understand their use of the discussion boards?
- How do parents experience and value the different kinds of support offered online and face-to-face?

I planned to observe a sample of regular users’ posts on the discussion forums of each of the two websites. I would also request to interview them over email.

### **Phase Three – Narratives of everyday parenting identities and practices in face-to-face contexts**

#### ***Research Questions:***

- How do parents in support groups and those recruited via websites narrate their everyday parenting practices when interviewed face-to-face?
- What is the nature of the support they seek?
- What are their practices of seeking online support and how does this engagement and experience differ from support groups and other face-to-face support?
- What normative discourses of parenting are suggested by parents' narratives of their everyday parenting practices in face-to-face interviews?
- How do these compare with normative parenting discourses given online (via the websites Mumsnet and Dad.info) and those present on the websites' homepages?

I planned to recruit a sample of attendees of a face-to-face support group at a Surestart children's centre, undertaking participant observation at the group as well as interviewing them individually face-to-face.

As the research progressed, the face-to-face element of my research became less prominent. This was in part due to me gaining access to interview the managers at both Mumsnet and Netmums, and this subsequently becoming a more dominant aspect of my design. From a practical perspective this meant that there was not the scope within this project to include the face-to-face parent support group interviews – in any case early seeking of recruits for this phase had not proved fruitful. Similarly, interview data I collected from managers at Dad.info was not included in the study due to all but one of the recruits from the online forum dropping out of the study.

In first engaging with parenting websites as a researcher, like users I became more familiar with the particular environments. But unlike many who have carried out key studies of parenting websites from qualitative perspectives (e.g. Madge & O'Connor 2006; Pedersen & Smithson 2010; 2013) I had not been a user prior to researching them. Of course I was

aware of them – being a father to young children. I also had a prior research interest in parents' experiences and understandings of parent support in face-to-face contexts – in particular what normative ideals of parenting were predominant and how these experiences influenced parents. This led to my interest in researching social support on popular parenting websites – what normative ideals / dominant discourses of 'parenting' are foregrounded and how these may be reproduced through the identities and practices of *parents* who use them. Working within the wider NOVELLA project (see footnote p.10), my research involved exploring methodological as well as substantive issues. The methodological issue that I focus on in my thesis is an exploration of the possibilities for narrative analysis in online research. In particular, the collection of narrative data and a comparison between narratives constructed in asynchronous email interviews and in face-to-face interviews.

The first phase of my project charts my engagement with popular parenting websites as a new user. As I had previously researched fathers' experiences of fathers-only parenting courses I had a parallel interest in the gendering of online parent support. The initial design of my project reflected this and I chose the two most 'popular' websites nominally aimed at mothers and fathers – namely Mumsnet and Dad.info. I ran into difficulties fairly rapidly. Despite an initial flurry of interest on Dad.info, with six users of the website responding to my ad, I found that over the following six months all but one of these dropped out of the research due to non-response. The one user who did not drop out was one of the few regular users of the forum and paid by Dad.info to be a moderator, so this did not match with the participants I had from the other two websites. There may be a variety of reasons for the eventual lack of response rate from users of Dad.info. Firstly, there were simply far fewer users of the website and even fewer that could be deemed regular users. Interviews I conducted with several of the management team at Dad.info confirmed my own observations that fathers tended to engage with the forum around a specific issue, often relating to relationship breakdown / custody of

children, and then disengage when they had received the desired advice. Notably, those users of the website who came forward were seemingly not regular users but had found the site whilst going through separation and used it as a place to vent feelings and seek specific legal information. What observation of forum posts and email contact I had with those who showed initial interest in taking part certainly attested to the notion that those who came forward were those who wanted their story to be heard. Indeed, the minimal data I did have was deeply rich in narrative. It is noteworthy that the high dropout rate of fathers from my study is congruent with their temporary intensive engagement with the forum and abrupt absence once they have the desired information.

Additionally, although Dad.info was billed as the UK's most popular website exclusively for fathers, it was nothing like as popular as Mumsnet or Netmums. The extent to which a meaningful comparison could be conducted between Dad.info and Mumsnet became increasingly debatable. As a key interest of mine was *popular* discourses of parenting I decided to include Netmums. While I initially planned to conduct analysis of all three websites, I had little choice but to drop Dad.info from the later phases of analysis when so few of my respondents came back to me. Furthermore, as my analysis grew more in-depth it became clearer that Netmums and Mumsnet were both far livelier online spaces with a life of their own and were thus likely to be more emblematic of dominant discourses / canonical narratives of support and everyday 'parenting' identities and practices. So the decision was also a pragmatic one – the parents I recruited from the Netmums and Mumsnet discussion forums (who all happened to be mothers) returned my questions during the first round of email interviews I conducted, whereas none but one of the fathers responded to my messages, despite numerous attempts to regain contact.

Being a stay-at-home-dad to our baby son from the age of three months, resident in Hackney, London when my wife returned to work full-time, I have a deeply reflexive relationship to my topic. Through a combination of my experiences of early fatherhood and that of working in a variety of family support contexts I developed an interest in discourses

of parenting and support and how parents are positioned in terms of their gender, sexuality, social class, and ethnicity. As parenting websites become increasingly popular, and some argue they offer empowerment and autonomy away from parenting 'experts', I wanted to explore whether and how such discourses may get taken up in these online spaces.

### ***Why Mumsnet and Netmums?***

I elected to focus on Mumsnet and Netmums as at the time of my research they were the two most popular UK-based parenting websites (Hardyment, 2007) and a key interest of mine was popular discourses of parenting and how these play out online. I would therefore argue that these websites will always be representative as case studies of what might be termed the 'structure of feeling' around online parenting support, following Gambles' (2010) appropriation of Williams' (1977) theory during that period (2012-2016). The Netmums founders being awarded OBEs and Mumsnet founders named in the BBC women's hour power list 2014 supports my argument for these websites as being most indicative in the culture during the period of study.

### **3.2: Epistemology**

As I am analysing the relationship between the construction of parenting identities and practices and wider discourses of 'parenting', together with the social support provided by popular parenting websites, two concepts are central to the thesis - social identities and practices.

The underlying orientation of the project is psychosocial (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman 2003), that is founded on both sociological and psychological concepts. Firstly, it is informed by the idea, postulated by sociologists Berger and Luckman (1967), that there is no objective social world but rather that individuals continuously constitute and are constituted by social reality in a dialectical process (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). The foundational influence of Mead, Schutz, Marx and Durkheim on Berger and Luckman's thinking should be noted.

Secondly, my project takes seriously Bruner's (1990) argument for re-establishing psychology as an interpretive discipline, distinguishing narrative as requiring the analysis of meanings. Locating myself in the field of narrative psychosocial studies I treated data as phenomenological accounts of experience. The approach takes into account that not only is the person narrating their story interpreting their experience but also that the researcher is constructing their account of it. This makes my research both (re)constructive and hermeneutic. Thus it is, to use the term coined by Bahktin (1986), inherently dialogic; meaning is co-constructed '... in a contradictory and multi-langued world' (p. 275).

Hermeneutics has been defined as 'a disciplined form of moving from text to meaning' (Josselson, 2004, p.3). Throughout my thesis I draw on Ricoeur's (1984) concept of narrative as a mode of temporally ordering and making sense of experience that is fundamentally human. However, I do so in recognition of the tension between what Josselson (2004) terms the hermeneutics of restoration and the hermeneutics of demystification, in her redefinition of Ricoeur's (1970) previous concepts of a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of faith (restoration) strives to understand the Other as they understand themselves and views accounts as unproblematic, accurate reports of experience, whereas his hermeneutics of suspicion (demystification) regards accounts as constructions, exploring the discursive, psychological and social processes underlying the immediate materiality of experience.

Operating in the tensions between these two forms of hermeneutics, in my research I attempted to maintain what Lapping (2011), drawing on the work of Bernstein (2000), has referred to as 'Multiple acts of interpretation (that) might bring a concept into being in different ways' (Lapping, 2011, p. 6). Furthermore, Delanty (2005) describes the reconstitution of feminist standpoint epistemology as a reflexive project enabling a more deconstructive 'objectivity', reflexive identities denoting multiple standpoints and the capacity of the researcher to take on the perspective of the Other. Being a father researching mothers and motherhood, the development of the researcher's capacity



for multiple standpoints and the perspective of the Other was of particular interest to me. In sum, rather than anchoring myself exclusively in a particular epistemological position, I want to argue that a more fruitful standpoint may be to remain open to a range of interpretive positions - thus taking up a position at the peripheries of multiple epistemologies.

### **3.3: Research Questions, research design and analytic theoretical frameworks**

In this section I outline my research questions and how these informed the design of the study.

Following Bruner's (1990) argument that

‘... we shall be able to interpret meanings and meaning-making in a principled manner only in the degree to which we are able to specify the structure and coherence of the larger contexts in which specific meanings are created and transmitted’ (Bruner, 1990, p.64-65).

I set out to analyse both the structure of the websites, the coherence of the narratives of their founders alongside the micro-level narratives of individual users of the websites.

I designed the study in three phases: First, a comparative study of a sample of key webpages of Mumsnet and Netmums. In this phase, I set out to explore dominant discourses of ‘parenting’ and social support on these webpages. To do this I employed multimodal discourse analysis. To explore further how the websites were positioned in founders’ narratives, in the second phase I interviewed their managers over the telephone and in a follow-up over email. Narrative analysis was conducted on these data. The focus of the third phase was to understand users’ perspectives, the role of these websites in women’s identities as mothers and their parenting practices. I carried out twelve loosely structured interviews - one over email and one face-to-face – with three women recruited on

Netmums and three recruited on Mumsnet. These data were firstly analysed thematically and sensitising concepts drawn out. Subsequent narrative analysis focused on the meanings these women understood their use of the respective websites to have, the use of online parenting forums theoretically framed as a contemporary social practice. In addition to this, turning points in the narratives of the six women were explored - individuals' accounts of constructing mothering identities analysed in the context of using parenting websites.

I will now present in detail the sub questions that I addressed in each of the three phases of my study and interrogate the connected theoretical frameworks and concepts for each phase. I will also discuss the methods I selected for each set of research questions.

### 3.3.1: Phase One: Mumsnet and Netmums websites and multimodal discourse analysis

The research questions for the multimodal discourse analysis of Mumsnet and Netmums were:

- i) What are the dominant discourses around which key webpages of each website are organised?
  - What normative ideals of 'parenting' do these discourses suggest?
  - Are these consistently presented or undercut by contradictory discourses?
  - In what ways are the websites constructed around gender, class, racialisation, sexuality?
  - How far are discourses of top-down professional 'knowledge' about 'parenting' visible in parenting websites?

Following nascent research into ideological aspects of parenting websites – in particular Pedersen and Smithson's (2010; 2013) and

Jensen's (2013) work on Mumsnet - I wanted to explore the websites as potentially powerful discursive environments, beginning with their 'architecture' (Jensen, 2013). Whilst my project is rooted both methodologically and substantively in narrative approaches, social semiotic multimodality - in particular Kress's (2010) argument that language is no longer necessarily the pre-eminent mode of communication - offered a useful way in to addressing discourse within online spaces. From this perspective, it is not the case that the analysis of language becomes less important, rather it is proposed that language should now be analysed as a mode among many interacting modes within a wider semiotic frame (Jewitt, 2009).

In the context of my project, 'Discourse' is defined as what Gee (2012) has termed 'big 'D' Discourse' – i.e. a system of language use and other meaning-making practices that form ways of talking about social reality. Gillian Rose's (2012) succinct definition of discourse as 'a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it.' (p. 190) was also useful. In my area of interest, an example of such a Discourse would be 'intensive parenting' (Hays, 1996). While there are a variety of specialist uses of the term multimodality, in my analysis it pertains specifically to semiotic modes – thus the term mode 'refers to a set of socially and culturally shaped resources for making meaning' ('Glossary of Multimodal terms', 2014). Two other key terms that underlie social semiotic multimodality are ideology and text. Ideology denotes the particular configuration of discourses in a given text, while Kress (2012) defines the term 'text' as:

'The material site of emergence of immaterial discourse(s)... Texts, of whatever kind, are the result of the semiotic work of design, and of processes of composition and production. They result in ensembles composed of different modes... Texts realize the interests of their makers.' (p. 36).

Social semiotics' framing of meaning as always residing in the social (Hodge & Kress, 1988) is congruent with the poststructuralist view of knowledge as always situated and produced by and for particular interests, circumstances and epochs (Maclure, 2003), in particular the work of Barthes (1977) and Foucault (1991). The move away from a preoccupation with the linguistic analysis of the structures of language at or below the level of the sentence towards 'Big "D" Discourse' (Gee, 2012) reflects an interest in wider power relations which is also a central concern of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2002).

Also foundational to social semiotic multimodality are Bernstein's (1974) ideas exploring how the wider institutional structure of society affected symbolic structures and local communication processes, and Halliday's (1978) specific attempt to interpret linguistic processes from the standpoint of the social order (Halliday, 1978). Four key assumptions underlie social semiotic multimodality: 1. Language is one part of a broader multimodal ensemble; 2. The meaning of signs is social and influenced by the sign maker's interest in a social context; 3. Each mode does different semiotic work, for example a photograph may show what writing cannot tell; and 4. People make meaning through the selection and configuration of modes (Kress, 2010).

The analysis of online parenting discourses combines well with social semiotic theory with its focus on the active organization of multiple modes into shared cultural resources through which particular social groups' identities and practices may be given meaning. In calling for a wider lens through which modes other than language can be effectively explored a multimodal approach also speaks to the increasing prominence of the visual in digital culture. Modes of still and moving image are increasingly dominant, as are the modes of movement and gesture as smart mobile technologies become more widespread.

As the foundational methodology in this study is narrative I also draw on Page's (2010) work. Bringing together research deploying multimodal narrative analysis, she describes narrative itself as

‘... a significant mode by which humans make sense of themselves and the world around them. However, the principles of multimodality remind us that narrative is only one mode amongst many, and a multimodal narrative analysis should not be taken to reinforce narrative imperialism but rather might serve to broaden our understanding of how and why narrative functions in relation to other modes in different contexts.’ (Page, 2010, p.6)

As my research took place across digital and face-to-face contexts this work was especially useful in helping me to maintain a holistic viewpoint in considering the different modal contexts that narratives might be embedded in. Furthermore, I hope that my research may contribute to a central aim in Page’s (2010) project of multimodal narrative analysis, namely to ‘expand the transmedial study of narrative to investigate the relationship between medium and mode’ (Page, 2010, p.11). Still, I should point out that I take up a rather more ambivalent position to that of Page in that I view multimodality as a nascent approach. I want to argue that while I understand that narrative may be usefully understood as merely one mode among many, and that any narrative analysis is inevitably partial (Atkinson, 2005), a long and rich tradition of social and philosophical underpinning (Heidegger, 2005; Ricoeur, 1984-1988; Gadamer, 2004) lends it considerable weight. For me, multimodality provided a useful starting point and wider lens through which to carry out a discourse analysis of the visual architecture of the websites – in this sense the multimodal narrative analysis of the webpages provides a backdrop to the analysis of the narratives of website managers and website users in the other two phases. I concur with De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012) that

‘... in many computer-mediated environments it makes little sense to talk about the structure of a story in purely linguistic (verbal) terms and without taking into account the multi-semioticity or multimodality that new media offer for its role in the creation of story plots’. (p. 122)

In my multimodal narrative analysis of the 'About us' pages I took into account the interaction of the narrative told with other modes such as the choice of colours and use of images on the pages. However, the deployment of multimodal analysis here should be understood as a taking account of rather than a subscription to still developing theories of multimodality. As my thesis is dually concerned with substantive and methodological issues, and is epistemologically founded on the notion of 'multiple standpoints', a key aspect of my study is the adoption of a variety of analytical lenses and data sources.

### 3.3.2: Phase Two: Website founder-managers and moderators of Mumsnet and Netmums and narrative analysis

In continuing to explore the websites as potentially powerful discursive environments, the next phase of my research involved interviewing those who had founded them and managed them on a day-to-day basis. The following research questions guided my analysis in this phase:

- ii) What narratives of 'parenting' and social support on the websites are foregrounded in telephone and email interviews with the managers and moderators of the websites?
  - In what ways are managers' personal narratives of parenting reflective of or in opposition to canonical narratives of 'parenting'?
  - How is gender, social class, ethnicity, sexuality constructed in the managers' narratives?
  - How far are discourses of top-down professional 'knowledge' about 'parenting' visible in managers' and moderators' narratives?

It should be noted that the narratives analysed in my study were elicited narratives rather than occurring in natural everyday communication. Throughout my analysis I also kept in mind that any

seemingly personal account is a form of self-presentation – a particular claiming of a personal-social identity – everything said functioning to validate this identity (Mishler, 1986; Goffman, 1959).

At this juncture it is necessary to define the concept of narrative. Rather than orienting to a singular definition of ‘narrative’, in my thesis the term refers to texts operating at several overlapping levels (Riessman 2008). Firstly, at the level of dominant cultural, or ‘canonical’, narratives of ‘parenting’ that become embedded as normative ‘ideals’. Defined by Phoenix (2013a) as ‘narratives of how life ought to be lived in the culture, i.e. normative cultural expectations’ (Phoenix, 2013a: 74; cf. Bruner, 1990), ‘canonical narratives’ are conceptually central to my analysis. Examples of contemporary canonical narratives of parenting might include:

- i) Motherhood is a natural and inherently desired status.
- ii) The reconfiguration of parenting as a set of instrumental skills rather than as fundamentally a relationship, at both a policy and popular level (Raemakers & Suissa, 2011).
- iii) The subscription to a particular philosophy of parenting, for example ‘attachment parenting’ (Sears & Sears, 2001), a manifestation of intensive parenting involving maximization of parental (maternal) responsiveness and bodily closeness.

Secondly, the personal narratives constructed by the women I interviewed – how these may position them in relation to canonical narratives and whether they tell counter narratives of their own experiences.

The argument that it is through narrative that life experiences can be made sense of, or ‘made present’ (Schiff, 2012; Freeman, 2010) and meaningful lives constructed is an important one here. Temporality is a key function of narrative - hope for the future being constructed through the recollection of past experiences and the potential reconfiguring of meaning in light of the present (Ricoeur, 1984). I draw on the concept that narrative is a fundamental mode of human thought, communication and understanding of reality. Spear-heading the narrative turn in the social

sciences of the early-mid 1980s, Bruner (1986) juxtaposed the narrative mode to the paradigmatic mode. Based on the confirmation or rejection of hypotheses as scientifically true or false, he argued that the paradigmatic mode had hitherto been privileged as both object of investigation and tool to pursue knowledge. Conversely, the narrative mode is concerned with particularities - human drama and vicissitudes - rather than general patterns, and its validity is based on verisimilitude rather than attempts to establish definitive scientific truths. Indeed, the notion that narrative as a mode operates on the basis of verisimilitude – truth to one's given role or identity - rather than objective truth, was central throughout my analysis,

‘The function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern. It is this achievement that gives a story verisimilitude.’ (Bruner, 1990, p.49)

Notably, the ambiguity of meaning in the narrative mode - wherein events are presented through a character's point of view with multiple perspectives left open – relates strongly to fiction (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). Indeed, Bruner (1986) asked ‘... how it is that stories create a reality of their own – in life as in art.’ (p. 43). My interest is in how the stories of parenting and social support told through the architecture of Netmums and Mumsnet, and their founding stories, may create a reality of their own – and how the personal stories of individuals who use them may be given meaning in their relative positioning to both the websites' stories and wider canonical narratives of parenting.

In the analysis of data from interviews with managers I paid particular attention to intertextual links between managers' personal narratives and perceived canonical narratives of 'western' parenting culture. The term 'intertextuality' was coined by Kristeva (1980) and is a concept that underpins the idea that texts are socially constructed. Phoenix (2013b) describes it as recognizing that,



‘... the meaning of any text is affected by the meanings established in other previous or contemporary texts. Following Saussure, Kristeva considered that the author of a text and its reader are connected and that each text is connected to other texts (as in Bakhtin’s dialogism). The two axes are linked because there is no straightforward transfer of meaning from writer to reader. Instead, every text and every reading depends on prior codes which mediate meaning.’ (Phoenix 2013b, p. 161)

The notion of texts as developed in critical literary theory is especially resonant in this phase of analysis as it was the founding stories of those who set up the two websites that I was interested in exploring. These stories were framed in analysis as having the potential to be the official public narratives of the websites, thereby suggesting their brand identities, while also constituting the personal narratives of the managers. This led to exploring theories applied to fictional narratives, in particular Ricoeur’s (1992) interconnected concepts of emplotment, narrative identity and discordant concordance. These latter concepts relate to Aristotle’s theories of the tragic genre in drama – wherein plot, i.e. the active ‘organization of events’ (muthos) and ‘imitation of action’ (mimesis), precedes the construction of characters. Denoting the plotting of a story through narrative recounting, the process of emplotment is defined succinctly by Polkinghorne (1991) as

‘A procedure that configures temporal elements into a whole by “grasping them together” and directing them towards a conclusion or ending. Emplotment transforms a list or sequence of disconnected events into a unified story with a point and a theme.’ (1991, p.141)

Framing emplotment as ‘the common work of the text and the reader’ (Ricoeur 1991, p.27), Ricoeur termed this process ‘discordant concordance’ - the plot bringing wholeness to narrative, unifying disparate

narrative elements into a complete story, making it more intelligible and engaging for the listener.

Connected to this is the notion of narrative identity, denoting the identity of the character constructed in connection with the plot. Central to Ricoeur's thesis is the notion that the identity of the character in a given narrative becomes comprehensible through transferring to the character the operation of emplotment, initially applied to the recounted action (Ricoeur, 1992). These conceptual categories operate in conjunction with one another - 'it is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character' (1992, p.143) – hence 'narrative identity'.

Another key concept in my study is that of positioning. I deploy the concept in Phase two to explore how those who manage them position the websites both in relation to one another and according to the perceived social identities and practices of their users. Moving away from the previous more static and separable concept of role, Davies and Harré (1990) describe positioning as focusing

'... on the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in certain ways and yet at the same time is a resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions. A subject position is a possibility in known forms of talk; position is what is created in and through talk as the speakers and hearers take themselves up as persons.' (p. 26)

Users' positioning of particular parenting websites in relation to their own identities and practices (Phoenix 2013a) is also an important consideration in my study.

Connected to the concept of positioning is that of interpellation. Interpellation is a concept introduced by Althusser (1971) whereby everyday institutions 'hail' people into prescriptive categories with associated ways of thinking and acting as subjects. This concept has

been further developed in Rose and Miller's (2008) use of Foucault's work, in particular the concept of governmentality, namely,

'... a range of rationalities and techniques that seek to govern without governing society, to govern through regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors in the context of their particular commitments to families and communities.' (Rose & Miller, 2008, p. 84)

Building on work cited in the literature chapter addressing the operation of expert discourses of 'parenting' in various contexts (Edwards and Gillies, 2011; Shirani et al., 2012; Jensen 2010; 2013; Ramaekers and Suissa, 2011), my study deploys the concept of governmentality to explore how varying forms of moderation/regulation on popular parenting websites might serve to position potential users in particular ways, for example in terms of social class and gender.

### 3.3.3: Phase Three: Parent users of Mumsnet and Netmums

In the third phase of my study I focus on those who use the respective websites. I carried out two interviews each with three mothers who regularly used Netmums and three who regularly used Mumsnet. As my sample was only six cases, the aim of my analysis was not to make any claims about the general practices of the users of Mumsnet and Netmums, but rather these women's narratives were framed as case studies. I explore their practices, the meanings of websites to them and how their interpretation of the websites spoke to the wider narrative of both the given website and canonical narratives of mothering.

The main research question driving the design of this phase was, iii) How did mothers who were users of Mumsnet and Netmums narrate their experiences of motherhood and their use of the websites? After carrying out a thematic review of all my data, sub-questions were developed in relation to two key themes that appeared across the data: firstly, participants' understanding of their use of Mumsnet or Netmums,

what it meant to them as women and mothers; and secondly, turning points in their experiences of motherhood and how these related to their use of parenting websites.

### 'The practice of using online parenting forums'

As a key theme appearing across data from those I interviewed was how they understood their use of online parenting forums, it was theoretically framed as a contemporary social practice. This links with the discursive approach to analysis also employed in that it is through their narratives that these mothers gave meaning to the practice of using online parenting forums. Research questions guiding this analysis were:

- What constitutes the practice of using online parenting forums?
  - What are its materials (i.e. Computers, mobiles)
  - What particular competencies are involved in carrying out the practice of using online parenting forums?
  - What meanings does the practice hold for the participants and what meanings do they construct through the practice of using online support forums?
- Are there contradictions in the sense making of users of online forums?
- How were participants recruited into and how did they become carriers of the practice of using online parenting forums?
- How does the practice change and evolve?

In this analysis I drew on Shove, Pantzar, & Watson's (2012) appropriation of social practice theory. They in turn draw on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, which contends that, whilst individuals tend to frame their actions in terms of conscious purpose and intentions, some practices are habitual and largely outside the realm of discursive consciousness. Building on this, Shove et al.'s (2012) conceptual

framework further explores the emergence, evolution and disappearance of practices that have been typically understood as habitual, for example the emergence of daily showering (Hand, Shove & Southerton, 2005). I will argue that some aspects of parenting and the use of parenting websites may be similarly understood.

I provide a more detailed outline of Shove et al.'s (2012) social practice theory alongside the relevant analysis in Chapter 6. It suffices to say here that they draw on a diverse range of theories of practice, a foundational principle being Schatzki's (1996) recalibration of Wittgenstein's situating of human understanding in the flow of praxis, as opposed to the minds of individuals. Shove et al. appropriate Reckwitz's (2002) notion that practices are made up of five elements - bodily activities; mental activities; background knowledge and understanding; "things" and their use; know-how; emotional and motivational knowledge states – arriving at a simplified framework pinpointing three elements that they argue make social practices when actively combined:

- *Materials* – things, stuff, technologies, tangible physical entities.
- *Competences* – skills, know-how, technique.
- *Meanings* – symbolic meanings, ideas, aspirations.

Practices are framed as social in that they are types of behaving and understanding appearing at different time points and locales, and carried out by different body/minds. So, people are framed as *carriers* of practices, neither entirely autonomous nor compliant conformers to norms. When thinking about how people become carriers of, or are recruited into the practice of using parenting websites, the concept of community is also important. Specifically, the degree to which the websites may draw in recruits from established networks already engaging in shared practices. Furthermore, the extent of women's commitment to the practice of using a particular parenting website is explored.

'The narratives of Mumsnet and Netmums online forum users:  
Motherhood, turning points and identities'

In addition, my analysis of the six mothers' narratives focused on the concept of identities - how identities are shaped by turning points in experiences of motherhood and how use of parenting websites related to these. Narrative "turning points" are moments in the telling of stories when the teller indicates a significant change in the expected life course and are useful in exploring the shifting meanings of past experiences and events, and consequently for the development of identities (Riessman, 2000; Mishler, 1999).

The sub questions guiding this part of my analysis were:

- How did these women narrate turning points in their experiences of motherhood?
- How did these narratives intersect with their talk about using online parenting forums?
- What (kinds of) parenting identities did these women construct through their turning point narratives?
- In what ways did online parenting forums enable / support these women to express these parenting identities?

In addressing these questions I again draw on Ricoeur's (1992) theory that identities have a narrative structure that is revealed through a process of emplotment. This denotes the constructing and reconstructing of past and present in which there is permanent tension between the self experienced as continuity and the self as representing stasis. According to Ricoeur, identities are built on a tension between two things: 'sameness' and 'selfhood'. Sameness denotes how a person constructs themselves and identifies with others according to attributes that persist over time such as gender, personality and habit, while selfhood denotes the ability to see ourselves in time as who we have been and who we are becoming.

This is especially salient when considering the relationship in these women's narratives between canonical narratives of mothering relating to gender and class for example, and their construction of their personal identities. Connected to this, it is important that the distinction is made between turning points that are integral to the life course of many women – e.g. becoming a mother - and the turning points in these particular women's stories. To this end, I draw conceptually on Brannen, Statham, Mooney and Brockman's (2007) research on the lifecourse of careworkers in children's services in Britain, in which they made links between Ricoeur's (1992) concept of identity and life course theory.

Foregrounding a concern with the pattern of individual lives in changing societies, a life course approach frames lives as made up of a series of life course transitions that constitute pathways or 'careers' relating to a number of often intersecting role domains, for example parenthood and work (Elder, 1994; Hughes, 1971). Oakley's (1980) application of Van Gennep's (1960) concept of status passage in her groundbreaking *Transition to Motherhood* study is related here and is foundational to this analysis. Drawing on Glaser and Strauss' (1971) development of Van Gennep's theory Oakley suggested that the individual passagee experiences the transition to motherhood in varying degrees as desirable, voluntary, controllable and central. Arguing that '...the passage to femininity is the *context* within which the passage to motherhood takes place' (p.187), Oakley drew attention to the competing life course careers, strained identities and ambivalences that may result in becoming a mother as previous self-concepts need to be remodelled and new practices developed to fit new circumstances. During my analysis several turning point narratives were identified that vary in relation to the women's feelings of control in the experience of becoming mothers and its consequences for their other identities. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between identity transitions during the experience of motherhood and the use of popular parenting websites as a new social practice.

### **3.4: Research Methods:**

In this section I describe the methods I used in each phase of my study.

#### **3.4.1: Multimodal discourse analysis of key webpages and frameworks of Mumsnet and Netmums (Phase One)**

I carried out a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA) of data collected from a sample of key webpages of Mumsnet and Netmums. As social semiotic multimodality is such a new framework I developed my own approach through drawing on leading scholars in the field – in particular Bezemer and Jewitt (2009), Kress (2012), Knox's work on the social semiotics of online newspapers (2007; 2012), and Page's (2010) work on Multimodal perspectives in narrative research.

I viewed the websites twice weekly over a period of 12 months, capturing regular screen-grabs. I drew maps of the homepages' layouts in order to examine the shape and framing devices utilised in the design outside the context of the genre and content of the particular websites. I also created transformations of the homepages – placing elements of one within the other to explore the semiotic role played by individual modes in the overall ensemble and potential alterations of meaning. In order to conduct a fine-grained multimodal analysis, focal texts were selected for more detailed exploration. My overriding interest in the visibility of dominant discourses and normative ideals of parenting meant that I selected focal texts for more in-depth analysis that typically appeared regularly on the websites, such as particular photographs or logos. In line with my overall focus on narrative I also conducted a multimodal narrative analysis of the websites' 'About Us' pages. This selection process was guided by my research questions.

Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2010; 2006) work on the grammar of visual design, particular concepts that were useful included: Interest – denoting the interest of an initial sign-maker in the orchestration of a sign-complex and how this may set the ground of the multimodal



ensemble in the interests of an interpreter; Reading Path – whereas texts are traditionally read from left-right and top-bottom in a linear fashion in western contexts, Kress (2010; 2012) has suggested that websites encourage more modular reading paths within an organizational logic that is spatial; Affordance – relating to the different possibilities for representation with particular modes.; Coherence - Following Gramsci's (2006) theories on hegemony, Kress (2012) suggests that it is breaks in coherence that may reveal underlying ideologies. More detail is provided about these and other concepts alongside the relevant analysis in Chapter Four.

#### 3.4.2: Interviewing founder-managers and moderators of Mumsnet and Netmums (Phase Two).

A colleague of mine was an acquaintance with somebody in a senior position at Mumsnet and through her I was granted permission to interview co-manager (JR) for my study. I made contact with SR - one of the founder-managers of Netmums - through a member of the management team at Dad.info, as they had previously done some collaborative work. I had made initial contact with the creator of Dad.info through one of my supervisors, Professor Julia Brannen.

When seeking permission for the interview I emailed ahead a letter from my supervisor (Appendix 2) along with some information about my proposed project. I decided to also send my questions ahead as I was aware that both managers would have busy schedules and may prefer to respond over email than arrange a separate interview date (Appendix 3). Examples of questions are, 'Can you tell me the story of how Mumsnet / Netmums came into being?' 'What messages does the website want to communicate about being a parent?' and 'What are the main things people use the website for?' It is important to note that this sending ahead of questions and asking them for stories meant that narratives from these interviews were elicited accounts in response to questions rather than spontaneous (Riessman, 1997). With each manager I firstly conducted an

interview over the telephone and then sent follow-up questions approximately five months later (Appendix 4). I also carried out a Skype interview with one member of the moderating/support teams at each website: a parent supporter and forum moderator from Netmums and a member of the community team at Mumsnet.

As each manager was unique to the website these interviews were not easily pilotable, though the interviews I had previously conducted with members of the management team at Dad.info served as pilots of a kind. The interview schedule was loosely structured in the sense that while I sent questions ahead I let the participants lead the direction of the conversation as much as possible, allowing for space to follow their narrative trails.

In preparing for these interviews I explored literature regarding researching powerful people (Walford, 2011). While some have advocated being less concerned with rapport and adopting a more confrontational interview style than usual in order to ensure bland answers are not given (Mickelson, 1994), I opted rather to maintain an inquisitive rather than adversarial style (Pruyadharshini, 2003). This approach was successful in gleaning narratives from these managers.

<b>Phase 1: Homepages and frameworks of the websites</b>	<b>Phase 2: Website founder-managers and moderators</b>	<b>Phase 3: Parent users of the websites</b>
Multimodal Discourse Analysis of homepage data	4 interviews with managers (2 telephone / 2 email)  3 interviews with moderators (2 x Skype / 1 email)  Narrative analysis	12 interviews (6 email / 6 face-to-face)  Survey  Thematic review of all case data  In-depth narrative analysis

Table 3.1: Table of methods used in each phase of the study

## Data Analysis

As I was only analysing two interviews in this phase it was not necessary to conduct a thematic review of the data. My research questions had been developed from the MMDA in Phase One. I explored the intertextual relationships between the narratives each manager told of their personal experiences of parenting, setting up the respective websites, and the official public narrative identities of Mumsnet and Netmums as analysed through the web pages.

As well as deploying the aforementioned concepts of emplotment, discordant concordance and narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1991), I paid particular attention to concepts outlined by Bruner (1990). These included: Quantifiers – ‘everybody does that’; Deontic modal – ‘that’s what you’re supposed to do’; Sequentiality; Factual indifference; Dramatic quality – e.g. action, catharsis, metaphor; Dual landscape – where the ‘real world’ is presented as concurrent with mental events in the individual telling the story; Exceptions to the expected cultural narrative (canonicity) being made sense of through stories implicated in an intentional state in the protagonist – e.g. their belief or desire – and some canonical element in the culture. Greater explication of these concepts is provided in chapter 5 alongside the pertinent analysis.

### 3.4.3: Parent users of Mumsnet and Netmums (Phase Three)

In the next phase of my research the initial challenge was getting enough recruits for the study. Initially, I followed Kozinets (2010) guidelines for preparing to undertake what he calls a ‘netnography’, the major part of my research at that point being to familiarise myself with the ‘netiquette’ of online parenting websites. After undertaking a broad search of all UK-based parenting websites I lurked on Mumsnet and Netmums and posted occasionally, as well as the fathers’ website Dad.info, for a period of ten months. In accordance with the ethical guidelines of my institution and that of the wider NOVELLA project, I decided that my research would be overt – thus I initially posted an advertisement for

recruits to my study on the designated forums for media and research requests of Mumsnet and later on Netmums when I decided to include it in my study.

My initial post read,

‘Title: DOCTORAL RESEARCH: SEEKING MUMSNET USERS TO TALK ABOUT YOUR PARENTING EXPERIENCES.

‘I am a PhD student at the Institute of Education, University of London researching parenting online and face-to-face. My interest in this comes from being a father to two young children myself (I was a SAHD when my son was a baby) and working in children and family services for several years. If you are a parent who uses the Mumsnet forum regularly, are UK-based and are interested in telling your parenting story please send me a message through this website or contact me via email: [j.winter@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:j.winter@ioe.ac.uk). I will then send you more detailed information about my project.’

The proposed ethnographic and explorative nature of my nascent project led to some emails from Mumsnet users asking for more clarity on what my project would entail. I provided official letters from my institution and extra information as far as possible whilst explaining that there were no fixed hypotheses as such, but that this was a new and expanding area of activity as well as research (Appendix 5). I had seven users of Mumsnet show an initial interest in my project, four of these did not take part – one starting the email interview but then stopped replying to my emails, three users continued and completed the research. From Netmums I had six initial expressions of interest in my project, three of these dropped out in the early stages of email interviews while three completed the research.

The six mothers who came forward for interview included both partnered and single mothers. However, it should be noted that the group who took part had experienced motherhood either as a negative experience or became mothers under difficult conditions. I asked each participant to fill out a short survey to gather basic demographic data (Appendix 6). The majority of my sample were middle-class according to

current and past occupation and education. On the basis of her job as a clerical assistant Emily could be described as working-class. All six women identified as white British in ethnicity and heterosexual in the survey. It should be noted that it is likely that whiteness was taken for granted among my sample, perhaps not being considered as an ethnicity at all. The same may be said of heterosexuality – that it may have been taken for granted. This may explain why discussions around ethnicity and sexuality did not feature in the interviews. Furthermore, the aspects of my identity shared with my participants – namely assumed ethnicity, social class and heterosexuality – need to be taken into account as influential in the interview encounters.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Website</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Occupation /Education</b>	<b>Children: Genders /Ages</b>	<b>Housing</b>
<b><i>Rachel</i></b>	Mumsnet	31-36	Married	Stay at home mother / PhD Student	1 girl, 8 years / 1 boy, 3 years	Owner occupied
<b><i>Louise</i></b>	Mumsnet	37-45	Single	Previously music journalist with own PR company / Undergraduate Student	1 boy / 2.9 years	Privately rented
<b><i>Donna</i></b>	Mumsnet	31-36	Married	Shop manager / Degree level	1 boy / 4 years	Owner occupied
<b><i>Emily</i></b>	Netmums	25-30	Single	Clerical assistant in service sector / A Levels	1 girl / 5 years	Privately rented
<b><i>Nicola</i></b>	Netmums	31-36	Married	Teacher – part-time / Degree level	2 girls / 2 years and 3 months	Owner occupied
<b><i>Helen</i></b>	Netmums	25-30	Co-habiting	Social worker – part-time / Degree level	1 girl / 1 year	Owner occupied

Table 3.2: Table of users of the websites who completed the research

Before interviewing the women recruited for my study I carried out pilot interviews with acquaintances both over email and face-to-face. This

process informed both my developing research questions and the topic guide for my final interviews.

I carried out asynchronous email interviews with each of these participants, apart from one of the Netmums users (Helen) who only sent me one response over email so her online interview was incomplete. The email interviews took place over five exchanges and were loosely structured in the sense that rather than sending a set of fixed questions ahead I responded to each of their replies, probing for more detail on aspects of their responses that were of particular interest. A copy of the interview schedule I worked from is in the Appendix (6). The design of the email interview schedule drew on literature on email interviewing (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; James & Busher, 2006; Gibson, 2010) that directed me to, for example, allow enough time for the exchanges to develop at each participant's pace. Some replied to my emails the same day I sent them while others sometimes took several weeks to get back to me.

I carried out a second face-to-face interview with each of the participants four to six months after the first email interviews commenced (Appendix 7). These took place in locations chosen by the participants - either in their homes or public venues, such as cafés, close to where they lived. As with the managers' interviews both the email and face-to-face interviews involved responses to questions so were inherently 'recipient designed' (Riessman, 1997).

Whilst the email interviews produced what might be termed ready-made transcripts, during the face-to-face interviews I took brief notes and recorded each interview on a digital recorder, as well as making field notes to record my impressions immediately after each interview. As I was interested in comparing the different types of narrative data in email and face-to-face interviews I made the analytic decision not to combine the material. For example, on several occasions I probed for more information on a response from a previous email which, had the interview been occurring in real time, I would have done at the time that response was expressed. I indicate throughout the thesis when quotes are presented

from email or face-to-face interviews. In line with the rest of the NOVELLA projects my synchronous interviews were transcribed using Jeffersonian conventions (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Following Emerson and Frosh's (2009) work using narrative I also listened repeatedly to recordings of interviews to develop a 'circular process of transcription/analysis' (p.148), foregrounding the co-construction of my data. This approach chimes with my interpretive hermeneutic epistemology.

Pen portraits of each of the participants can be found in Appendix 8.

### Data analysis

In this phase I firstly conducted an initial thematic review of all case data. Transcripts were colour-coded by hand, mapping key themes and drawing out sensitizing concepts featured across the cases before key extracts were selected for further in-depth narrative analysis. Similar to Bruner's (1986) aforementioned distinction between the narrative and paradigmatic modes in social science, Blumer (1954) distinguished sensitising concepts that 'suggest directions along which to look', from definitive concepts which attempt to 'provide prescriptions of what to see' (p. 7). He argued that to attempt to understand the meaning of everyday social experience

'We have to accept, develop and use the distinctive expression in order to detect and study the common. ... One moves out from the concept to the concrete distinctiveness of the instance instead of embracing the instance in the abstract framework of the concept. ... It depends on faithful reportorial depiction of the instances and on analytical probing of their character. ... Its success depends on patient, careful and imaginative life study, not on quick short-cuts or technical instruments. While its progress may be slow and tedious, it has the virtue of remaining in close and continuing relations with the natural social world.' (Blumer, 1954, p. 9 - 10).

Sensitizing concepts that were teased out of the thematic review for in-depth narrative analysis were:

- i) Participants' positions in relation to wider canonical narratives of parenting and social support.
- ii) Co-constructed narrative interactions between participants and the wider website.
- iii) Positioning in relation to other parenting forums
- iv) Positioning in relation to me as researcher/interviewer.
- v) Use of online parenting forums as an everyday practice.
- vi) Framing use of websites in the context of narratives of becoming and being mothers – in particular turning point narratives.

i), v), and vi) were most dominant across the data set. It was these three that I conducted more in-depth narrative analysis on, greater detail of which is provided in the relevant chapters (see Appendix 9 for a sample analysis).

Throughout the period of analysis reliability of my data was supported through supervision sessions and peer discussion groups, as well as presenting work in progress at several conferences during the course of my PhD studies.

### **3.5: Ethics**

I was granted permission to carry out this research by the internal Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education prior to the commencement of data collection in October 2012 (Appendix 1).

An important issue to emphasise is that as the managers of both Mumsnet and Netmums are well-known figures it was not possible to effectively anonymise them in the writing up of my research – their initials are used in the final report. Their informed consent was received over email prior both to them being interviewed and the conducting of the



subsequent phases of my research. In line with the interpretive hermeneutic epistemology of my project I would reiterate that the data drawn on in Chapter Five should be viewed as co-constructive and wherever possible I include my own words in quotations used. A summary of my thesis has also been sent to each of them. All other participants in the research, comprising moderators and users of the websites, were given pseudonyms.

While key fundamental ethical considerations; confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent are consistent with offline research, it was important to give the online context separate consideration. Association of Internet Researchers (Ess, & the AoIR ethics working group, 2002; AoIR, 2012; Markham & Buchanan, 2011) guidelines were consulted and recommendations taken into account. For example, in relation to discussion forums, while it may be the case that a community can be accessed and viewed 'publicly', due consideration was given to the fact that participants may feel they are part of a trusted community and therefore content should perhaps not be reproduced verbatim in research reports (Eynon, Fry, & Schroeder 2008). As my research developed this consideration led to me making the ethical choice not to include quotes from messages I was observing my participants posting 'publically' on the forum, and instead only analyse material from the email and face-to-face interviews. The reason for this decision was that it was my participants' narrative understandings of their use of the websites in the context of motherhood that interested me, rather than the specific content of their posts on the forum itself. In this sense my work chimes with recent work by Johnson (2015) in which participants were interviewed about their use of websites rather than research being conducted on the websites themselves. In any case not all my participants gave me permission to observe their activity on the discussion forums as per my initial design, so there would have been inconsistency between cases had I used forum data for some but not others. As I accessed other information not made available 'publically' by my participants in interviews with them, to have combined this with quoting from their posts would arguably also have

compromised their anonymity (Zimmer, 2010). In following guidelines emphasising the importance of sound judgement of the particular context of interactions to discern when what is 'public is private' (Hewson, Buchanan, Brown, Coulson, Hagger-Johnson, Joinson, Krotoski, & Oates, 2013; McKee & Porter, 2009; Eynon et al. 2008) I felt that my data containing in-depth reflections on some sensitive topics meant it would be ethically questionable to assume these women's forum data were 'public' in the offline sense of the word. To have included it would arguably have compromised their informed consent regarding the continued anonymity and confidentiality of data used in my study. It was important that I took the lead of my participant-users of the forums in shaping my ethical framework, a decision that is supported by recent research, '... if researchers believe people may dislike it if they knew they were being quoted, is this not a reason to refrain from quoting their postings or to ask their consent...' (Elgesem, 2016, p.30). Also relevant to my project, and discussed by Elgesem (2016) is the importance of taking into account the level of sensitivity of subject matter and vulnerability of participants. That a number of my sample had experienced difficulties with their mental health in the context of motherhood led me to decide to fully protect their own sense of being anonymous on the websites.

## **Chapter 4: Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the websites**

### **4.1 Introduction:**

This chapter presents data from the first phase of my analysis of Netmums and Mumsnet. As a researcher I was new to these web spaces so part of the purpose of this phase of the project was to familiarize myself with the websites. I carried out a multimodal discourse analysis of key features of a sample of each websites' homepages and the 'About us' pages of each site. The rationale for beginning my analysis through a broader methodological lens taking equal account of language and other modes such as image, colour and layout is encapsulated by the notion that 'seeing comes before words' (Berger, 1972, p.7). The chapter is divided into three sections – the first exploring Mumsnet and Netmums from the perspective of social semiotic Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA). The next section presents my Multimodal Narrative Analysis of each of the websites 'About Us' pages. The chapter concludes with a section addressing similarities and differences between the websites' respective visual architectures.

The research questions guiding this multimodal discourse analysis were:

What are the dominant discourses around which typical features of key homepages of each website are organised?

- What normative ideals of 'parenting' do these discourses suggest?
- Are these consistently presented or undercut by contradictory discourses?
- In what ways are the websites constructed around gender, class, racialisation, sexuality?

- How far are discourses of top-down professional 'knowledge' about 'parenting' visible in parenting websites?

## **4.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA):**

Viewing the websites twice weekly from July 2012 to July 2013, I gathered a sample of 60 different impressions of homepages from each website. Using this sample, I examined the layouts of the homepages and other pages, extracting elements of the pages that either featured regularly or were fixed features of the websites. These included the websites' logos, stock images, and typography. The rationale for this was that, as my interest at this stage was in popular parenting discourses, the regular features would be most indicative of the overall discursive ensembles.

### **4.2.1: Key concepts**

Particular key concepts from multimodal social semiotics that I deployed in the analysis were:

#### **Interest**

Kress (2010) views communication as a two-stage process – employing the musical metaphor of orchestration to denote the making of a sign-complex according to the interest of an initial sign-maker. In the case of parenting websites this could be website managers and designers. The result of this 'setting of the ground' is termed a 'multimodal ensemble' comprising multiple interacting modes all serving differing functions. The second stage of the communication process focuses on the interest and attention of an interpreter, in the case of parenting websites this is the user who produces, consumes and participates in sharing information and experiences of parenting online.

### Reading Path

My analysis takes into account the potentially different reading paths in online and more traditional contexts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010). Whereas, in Western culture, reading is temporally framed as a linear activity with a fixed beginning and end-point, websites encourage a modular reading path. Furthermore, in light of developments in online technologies that consist of elements drawn together within an organizational logic that is spatial, the continued pertinence of the concept of a reading path has been questioned (Kress, 2010; 2012). However, as these websites were both laid out according to relatively traditional formats, namely newspaper websites, the concept remained useful in this analysis. Especially useful was the notion of a 'hierarchy of importance' (Knox, 2007; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998) that affords different weight to different elements on the page, leading to certain discourses carrying greater salience while making others more marginal.

### Affordance

Affordance is a concept relating to the possibilities for representation in particular modes. The notion of affordance is inherently linked to that of 'constraint', which has relevance to the study of social network websites, as exemplified by Jones' (2009) work into the types of 'selves' that are made possible by the constraints placed on users of gay dating websites. In this case, the website was seen to supplement and amplify information suggested by included images, as well as to anchor and constrain such information through fixed sets of categories and possible identity labels available for users' profiles. Thus, the kinds of 'selves' this 'site of display' (Jewitt, 2009) made possible were limited by its social and technical architecture.

## Coherence

Kress (2012) argues that breaks in the coherence of texts are revealing of underlying ideologies. This concept is particularly pertinent to the third research question regarding the co-presence of potentially contradictory discourses of parenting and social support.

As well as drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) work on the grammar of visual design and more recent work by Kress (2010; 2012) focusing specifically on analysis of digital websites and MMDA respectively, my analysis drew on Rose's (2012) work on visual analysis. In setting out the criteria for a critical visual methodology Rose (2012) argues that there are three sites in which images become culturally meaningful: 1. The story of the *production* of an image – how an image is made; 2. The *image* itself – what it looks like; and 3. *Audiencing* - How it is seen by different audiences. These criteria each comprise three sub-criteria: 1. Technological – the tools used to make, structure, and display images; 2. Compositional – Visual construction, qualities and reception of an image; and 3. Social – social, economic, political and institutional practices that produce, saturate and interpret an image. I drew on social semiotic theory, a central concern of which is the ways in which social difference is created. This meant that considering in whose interests the websites' displays were constructed, the audiences they were aiming for and how they reached them were central. As I conducted this analysis alone I will not be making any claims about them beyond what was there for me to see at the points in time I engaged with the websites. Inherently and self-consciously offering a partial perspective, my deployment of multimodal discourse analysis illuminates the tension between method and experience and, therefore, appeals to experience as a valid form of knowledge. In this sense I understand this first phase as epistemologically important to the overall reflexive standpoint of my project.

#### 4.2.2: Mumsnet

Courted by politicians and celebrities alike, Mumsnet is the most well-known parenting website in the UK, its founders being voted the seventh most powerful women in the BBC Radio Four 'Women's Hour' Power List 2013.

#### *Multimodal Ensemble and Interest(s)*

I started my analysis by looking at the overall layout of the homepages as multimodal ensembles. As can be seen in Figure 4.1, the layout of Mumsnet is somewhat akin to a news website, featuring the logo in the top left corner and a headline bar across the top with tabs linking to other pages. The rest of the page is structured into three main columns that run down the whole page as the user scrolls down, with five smaller columns at the foot of the page. The modes of image and writing predominate, the modules of typed text being of a substantial and uniform size throughout the page – this accentuates the three-column format leading to its appearance being similar to a broadsheet newspaper website.

In terms of the reading path encouraged, Mumsnet's homepage adopts the principles of a traditionally western left-right, top-bottom reading path – for example designating the top left where the website logo appears as the starting point for the users' eye. A discourse of community is foregrounded by 'Talk' being positioned as the first category on the top-left. The box on the right side of the homepage, 'Mumsnet Talk', featuring currently popular threads on the discussion forum also remains permanently fixed. While there were some design changes during the period of analysis these were minimal which implies that Mumsnet has a visual brand to uphold.



Figure 4.1: Mumsnet homepage 23/07/13



## Pregnancy advice

Signs of pregnancy, due date calculator, tests and scans, where to give birth, antenatal health, hospital bag essentials, Braxton Hicks, stages of labour, pain relief, water births, caesareans...

→ **Pregnancy symptoms**

→ **Due date calculator**

→ **Monitoring baby movements**



Figure 4.2: Fixed module on Mumsnet homepage

Within each module on the Mumsnet website a block of writing appears to the left, with the image on the right of it. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theories of information value, whereby 'given' elements are placed on the left and 'new' elements on the right this suggests that writing is privileged over the visual within this space. This can be seen in Figure 4.2 that shows a module that featured on the homepage throughout my analysis. This left-right pattern changes when a story takes its place at the top of the website. In those cases, such as in Figure 4.3, the picture is switched to the left of the writing – this use of headline stories is also redolent of a traditional newspaper format, thus still privileging language.

**First picture! Duke and Duchess introduce their son to the world**



**Royals leave hospital:** Kate gave birth to her son at 4.24pm yesterday, with the announcement made just over four hours later. The baby weighs 8lb 6ozs; mother and child are doing well. Come congratulate her over here.

- Talk: There he is!
- Dear Kate: cut-out-and-keep guide to MN
- Newborn essentials list
- Attention, Will and Kate! Try our baby name finder
- Talk: your #tips4kate?
- Advice for new grandparents
- In pictures: priciest baby products

Figure 4.3: Headline story on Mumsnet homepage

After examining the overall layout of the homepage's visual architecture I focused on the content – exploring how different modes were orchestrated to create an ensemble of coherent meaning. Important considerations here were how the ground was set in the interests of the

owners and managers of the websites as initial sign-makers, and what other wider interests were incorporated into this 'setting of the ground' (Kress, 2010). I therefore took account of not only the design and images used by the websites but also the products advertised.

The dominant colour scheme of Mumsnet is a muted blue and white similar to that used by the popular social networking website Facebook, and to a lesser extent purple. The use of blue suggests masculinity and conservatism, although it may relate to notions of independence and autonomy that are still, in the context of hegemonic masculinity, associated with men, especially in relation to parenting. This may carry a message that, as well as being a parenting advice forum, Mumsnet is an autonomous online space for parents that is not

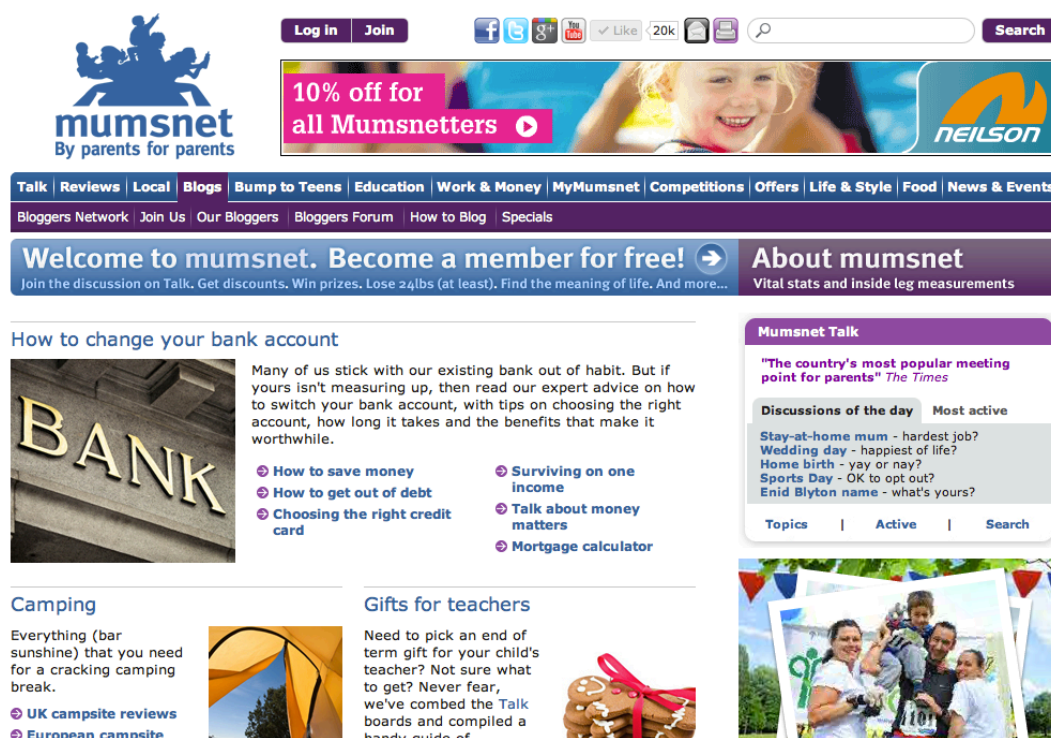


Figure 4.4: Top visible section of Mumsnet homepage July 2012

necessarily always child-centred. Indeed, it is typical for the main 'headline story' on Mumsnet to feature current affairs and connected

practical advice - for example, the main feature of the homepage above relates to expert advice about changing bank accounts.

As noted, the dominant mode on Mumsnet is writing, with 'story-modules' moving around the homepage from day-to-day, with a frequently changing headline story at the top. I found the images used on Mumsnet's homepage to be secondary, complementing the dominant mode of writing rather than standing alone. The relative greater modal affordance and information value given to writing on Mumsnet may suggest the discursive reproduction of classed parenting identities as framed by education and literacy.

Mumsnet's homepage foregrounds connectedness to wider culture via the placing of links to popular social networking websites Facebook, Twitter and YouTube at the top of the page (Figure 4.4). This was also seen in the appropriation of wider popular culture through their own branding as in these logo changes carried out to mark the Diamond Jubilee (Figure 4.5) and the Olympics in 2012 (Figure 4.6).



Fig. 4.5: Logo change for 2012 jubilee



Fig. 4.6: Logo change for London 2012

This incorporation of wider cultural symbols into their own brand positions the website as capturing the zeitgeist – whilst performed in the irreverent style that the site has become known for. This arguably enables the website to position itself centrally in wider parenting culture.

Product placement is a prominent feature of Mumsnet - a thread on the discussion board advertising for Mumsnetters to join an insight panel for testing products. The understated and conservative colour scheme of the Mumsnet branding enables advertisements on the homepage to stand

out; usually these are brighter in colour than Mumsnet's colour palette and contain some movement. The products advertised are openly described as those produced by Mumsnet's corporate partners. They also tend to invite the construction of a particular kind of middle-class lifestyle, for example Achica members-only online luxury home, garden and lifestyle store, Boden eco clothing company, and Neilson Ski, Beachclub and sailing holidays (Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7: Top of Mumsnet homepage

These adverts often directly implicate 'Mumsnetters' by offering discounts exclusive to them. This can be seen as an invitation to buy into a particular branded parenting identity, associated with a certain lifestyle and the consumption of particular kinds of products. This speaks to the suffusion of parenting identities with discourses and identities of consumption through a process of appellation (Williamson, 1978; Goldman, 2005) – a term that draws on Althusser's (1971) concept of 'interpellation' - through which people are hailed as particular kinds of subjects through advertisements. It also simply reflects the fact that these websites operate as businesses.

### Logo

Van Leeuwen (2005) argues that paying attention to how the mode of typography forges new relationships between graphics, images and letterforms is contemporarily vital as computer-mediated communication is

simultaneously oriented more towards writing than prior screen media, and also more visually oriented than traditional page media.

As the positioning of fathers within a website called Mumsnet is arguably questionable it is notable that there is no apparent father figure present in the logo, despite the strapline 'By parents for parents' (Figure 4.8). As already noted the blue of the logo is important to Mumsnet's image of being gender neutral – although blue canonically denotes masculinity.



Figure 4.8: Mumsnet logo

The font and colour of the logo (Figure 4.8), as well as all being in lower-case, is markedly similar to the logo of the guardian newspaper/website (Figure 4.9) - this perhaps providing an indication of the kinds of users at whom the website is pitched. The only upper-case letter is the 'B' of the strapline, 'By parents for parents' – this frames Mumsnet as being owned by individual users and the centrality of the peer-to-peer sharing of information to their brand. 'By parents for parents' emphasizes collectivity, notably also speaking to the Gettysburg address – 'By the people, for the people' - which emphasizes the politicization of parenting foregrounded by Mumsnet and also positions the site as the authoritative voice in that context (Gambles, 2010; Jensen, 2013).



Figure 4.9: The Guardian logo

Notably, the Mumsnet logo directly references American 1970s TV show 'Charlie's Angels' (Figure 4.10), wherein three female protagonists played roles traditionally reserved for men. The choice by Mumsnet to appropriate it as their logo may be revealing of the discourses informing the design and multimodal orchestration of Mumsnet. In one sense this logo reflects an emancipatory, feminist discourse where 'alternative forms of femininity' (Pederson & Smithson, 2013) are made available – where women dominate, co-existing with and supporting one another free from a discourse of shame induced by a pervasive culture of ever more conflicting parenting advice (Hardyment, 2007). However, it is arguably more complex as, although 'Charlie's Angels' female protagonists were cast in traditionally male roles, it was still a man who was their boss – 'Charlie' is never seen but arguably represents wider patriarchal society and the male gaze. This suggestion of power relations being reinforced is supported by Pedersen and Smithson's (2010) study in which they argue that Mumsnet routinely reinforced existing societal power relationships based on education and social status.



Figure 4.10: Charlie's Angels logo

#### 4.2.4: Netmums

Awarded OBEs in 2014 for 'services to families', popular parenting website Netmums is more service-oriented - framed more explicitly around support and advice, and local face-to-face meet-ups.

#### *Multimodal Ensemble and Interest(s)*

As can be seen in Figure 4.11, Netmums' homepage layout is also similar to a news website, featuring the logo in the top left and a headline bar across the top with tabs linking to other pages. The rest of the page is structured into three main columns that run down the whole page as the user scrolls down, with five smaller columns at the foot of the page. The modes of image and writing are dominant.





Figure 4.11: Netmums' homepage 23/7/2013

While the reading path encouraged adheres to the left-right rule of information value, Netmums' hierarchy of importance is organized more from a central point outwards. The middle of the page featuring a box



entitled 'Hot topics' containing headlines relating to popular topics in the blogging network (Figure 4.12), the discussion forum and questions for the doctor in the 'drop-in clinic' that day. All of these are typically child-related. 'Chat' is the last tab on the right of the menu bar on Netmums' homepage, after 'support'. The chat tab takes the user to the Netmums chat forum, called 'the coffeehouse' forum, while the main forum linked to through the 'support' tab is called 'the drop-in clinic'. This foregrounds a discourse of medicalised parent support with a service-orientation akin to a real world social services model.<sup>3</sup>

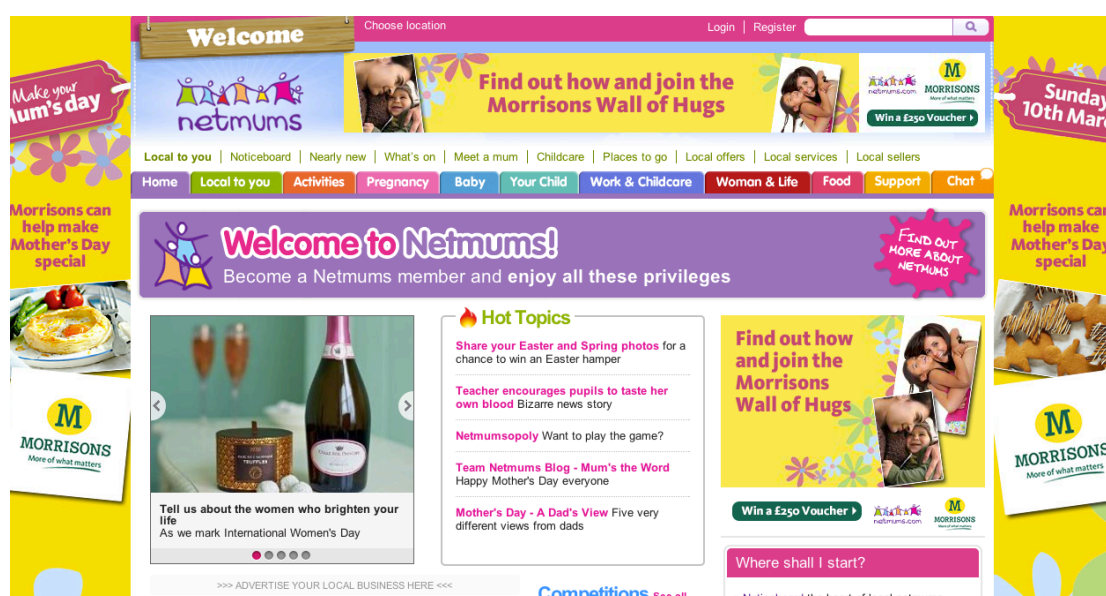


Figure 4.12: Visible portion of Netmums homepage March 2013

Overall, Netmums is very visually driven - image and movement dominant over writing. Homepages were typically dominated by one colour, often dictated by the main product advertised. Indeed, on most of the pages sampled during the period of analysis Netmums' entire homepage was framed with whatever advert featured most prominently at that time – for example, the yellow of the page featuring Morrisons (Figure 4.12) and the red Colgate (Figure 4.13). On the page framed by the

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that since the period of analysis, 'the coffeehouse' chat forum remains while the support section is now labeled as 'advice and support' with information pages about issues such as 'depression and anxiety' and 'single parents' and links to the latest posts on such topics in the forum. A search for the 'drop-in clinic' brings up a message that it is now closed.

Morrisons advert users of Netmums were invited to join the 'Wall of hugs' – a competition that the website ran to coincide with Mother's day 2013. By posting photographs on the website under the theme of 'hugs' users stood to win £250 of Morrison's vouchers. Netmums is positioned here as fitting in with the brand identity of a particular supermarket and the celebration of Mother's Day – arguably aligning itself with a normative ideal of parenting. During times when there was no advert framing the Netmums homepage, the backdrop consisted of brightly coloured cartoon figures linking arms – which form part of their logo – and a sunny hillside. These figures foreground a discourse of inclusivity and 'real world' local community.

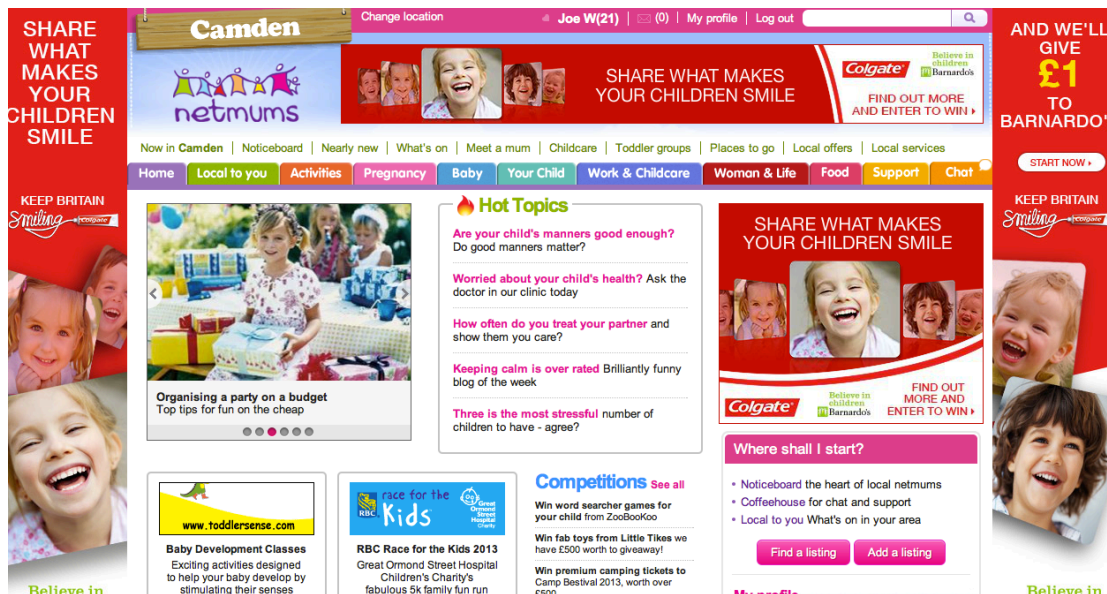


Figure 4.13: Visible portion of Netmums homepage April 2013

The impression upon logging onto Netmums is that it is a place that would appeal to – and is all about - young children as well as adults. The bright colours are suggestive of confectionary or toys and particular choices of symbols, for example the pink paint splat below (Figure 4.14) directly relate to the all-encompassing colourful chaos and mess of living with children. It is noteworthy that pink features heavily in the colour scheme of Netmums' branding. The presence of so much colour – each tab to linked pages is differently and brightly coloured (Figure 4.13) -

suggests both that motherhood is an all-encompassing identity and that it is, or should be, a happy time to be enjoyed – the cartoon figures that form the top part of the logo also imply this.



Figure 4.14: Netmums paint splat

A notable feature of Netmums at the time of analysis was a faux-wooden 'Welcome' sign hanging above the logo (Figure 4.15). This sign changes from 'Welcome' to whatever local Netmums site is visited – for example, 'Camden' (Figure 4.16) – and foregrounds a discourse of real-world face-to-face local community and connectedness.



Fig. 4.15: Netmums 'Welcome' sign



July 2013 Fig. 4.16: Netmums sign April 2013

Netmums' logo (Figure 4.17) features seven brightly coloured animated figures linking arms with a sky blue background, making them somewhat resemble bunting blowing in the wind. Being of relatively different size – three are larger while there are four smaller ones - these connected figures foreground family and the centrality of the child to the Netmums brand. The font of the logo is in purple and has the appearance of words written for easy reading.



Figure 4.17: Netmums logo

Notably, Figure 4.15 was captured around the time of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in the UK in 2012 and features Union Jack bunting, showing Netmums embedding itself in wider cultural events. During 2012 Netmums also carried out a campaign called 'United Kindmums'. Described as 'a year of action by Netmums members where mums around the country are united in making small changes to their lives to make bigger changes to others' lives', this speaks intertextually to the former Coalition Government's 'Big Society' ideology that arguably sought to absolve government from responsibility for social problems and to 'put more power in peoples' hands'. Whilst this Netmums campaign is, on the face of it, a morally positive one, it also implies the operation of governmentality through the website.

### **4.3: Multimodal narrative analysis of 'About Us' pages**

The main approach adopted in the thesis is narrative. Therefore, I examined the 'About us' pages of the two websites. These pages are important in capturing the story those who run the websites have constructed about their purpose, origin, and social positioning. In analysing the 'About us' pages, narrative is framed as a mode alongside that of image, colour and typography. In particular, the focus is on the interaction of the narrative told with these other modes to form an overall ensemble of meaning that is particularly salient in the context of digital mediums. Incorporating the concept central to social semiotics that socially contextual meaning is made through a wide range of modes, Page (2010) states,

‘Multimodal narrative analysis reminds us that such separation (of context of localized situation in which words are uttered and context of culture) is illusory and that not only does all language operate within cultural systems, so narratives (whether naturally or technologically produced) are received in local contexts by actual audiences’. (Page, 2010, p. 7).

Accordingly, the analysis that follows frames narrative as one mode within a wider multimodal ensemble, taking account of its intertextual relationship with other modes of image, colour and layout in the multimodal presentation of these websites’ stories. It is also important to reiterate here that the ‘local context of actual audiences’ in this phase of my analysis was my own interpretation as an audience of one.

#### 4.3.1: Mumsnet

As was the case on the Mumsnet homepages the mode of writing is dominant on their ‘About us’ page (Figure 4.19). Indeed, the only image is a ‘Boycott Nestlé’ badge which positions Mumsnet as a politically engaged collective – the featuring of their various campaigns here also foregrounds political consciousness as key to their brand identity. The dominant discourse in the opening paragraph of this ‘About us’ section involves the peer-to-peer swapping of advice pertaining to different kinds of consumption both related and unrelated to parenting - ‘holidays, pushchairs and last night’s TV’. It should be noted that in the stated aims that follow this, advice and support are mentioned, and that in ‘The Mumsnet Census Survey 2011’ 78 per cent are reported to come to Mumsnet for advice. It is notable that ‘pooling knowledge’ is placed ahead of advice and support - ‘Make parents’ lives easier by pooling knowledge, advice and support’ (Figure 4.19). The second aim emphasises the light-touch moderation of the Mumsnet forum, notably stating that ‘Mumsnet is a site for grown-ups’. This is important for two reasons: first, it privileges individual adult identity over that of parents or mothers, thus constructing

the brand identity of Mumsnet as about more than parenting; second, stating that it is 'a site for grown-ups' marks Mumsnet out as a space where parents, and in particular mothers, will not be infantilized and can be in control of their own lives. The emphasis on not over-moderating and being 'a site for grown-ups' in one of its two key aims implies that not all websites are like this, thus affording Mumsnet 'adult' status and positioning it as a brand leader. Placing a badge boycotting an international business as big as Nestlé so prominently serves to position Mumsnet as a big business itself. However, the statement 'Mumsnet is a business funded mainly by advertising and we hope to be a profitable one but our overarching aim is not the pursuit of profits' (Figure 4.19) while justifying their business model, marks the website out as a space where ethics and political consciousness are deemed to be important. The placement of their advertising policy so prominently in the 'About us' section indicates that Mumsnet are upfront about the commodification of parenting (and social support) and their place in this. Mumsnet is seemingly a space where parenting (mothering) is both politicised and commodified.

## About us

**Mumsnet** was conceived in early 2000 out of a disastrous family holiday. The idea was to create a website where parents could swap advice about holidays, pushchairs and last night's TV. Twelve years later and who'd have thought it would come to this? Mumsnet is now the UK's busiest social network for parents, generating nearly 40 million page views per month and nearly 5 million visits per month.

### Our aim is to:

- Make parents' lives easier by pooling knowledge, advice and support.
- We try, as far as possible to let the conversation flow and not to over-moderate. Mumsnet is a site for grown-ups.

### Our advertising policy



Mumsnet is a business funded mainly by advertising and we hope to be a profitable one but our overarching aim is not the pursuit of profits. We are independently owned and we endeavour to conduct business in an ethical manner.

With this in mind, Mumsnet supports the WHO/UNICEF International Code on the Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and **we do not accept advertising from a number of companies including Nestlé, and for a number of products, such as formula milk and cosmetic surgery, that we believe do not sit well with our**

**philosophy** - namely to make parents' lives easier.

### Mumsnet campaigns

Figure 4.19: Mumsnet 'About us' page



During the collecting of the data for Phase One, the 'About us' section was changed, one of the manager's screen names, JustineMumsnet (Figure 4.20), being used and the list 'holidays, pushchairs and last night's TV' (Figure 4.19), being changed to 'not just holidays but all the other stuff parents talk about.' (Figure 4.20)

## About us

**Mumsnet** was conceived in early 2000 when JustineMumsnet embarked on a disastrous family holiday. Her idea was to create a website where parents could swap advice about not just holidays but all the other stuff parents talk about. Thirteen years later and who'd have thought it would come to this? Mumsnet is now the UK's biggest network for parents, generating over 50 million page views and 9 million visits per month.

Figure 4.20: Change to Mumsnet 'About us' page March 2013

While the rest of the page remained the same these subtle changes are notable as they indicate that this is a narrative that is still being developed. Firstly, by attributing her own name to the narrative of the 'disastrous family holiday', Justine makes the narrative indubitably hers. This personification of the founding narrative permeates other subsequent narratives of the genesis of Mumsnet and its brand identity. As is frequently the case with founding narratives, such as those that form innumerable 'great man' stories fixed in and by history (Griswold, 2013), the transformation of the founding narrative of Mumsnet into a personal narrative gives it greater veracity – it really happened to somebody. This affords Mumsnet authenticity, perhaps offering potential users the opportunity to refract their own narratives as parents through the Mumsnet story. Historical archives of the website located on archiving website [thewaybackmachine.com](http://thewaybackmachine.com)<sup>4</sup> show that the 'disastrous holiday' did not feature on early 'About us' pages. This might be seen to follow the trend and subsequent normalisation of information previously deemed personal being shared online, and may result from an increase in the accessibility of the Internet to a wider range of people through the rise of social network sites. It is also indicative of the current vastness of Mumsnet; they now have a brand identity to uphold.

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that [thewaybackmachine.com](http://thewaybackmachine.com) had only archived the Netmums 'About Us' page from 2011 so older versions were not available to view.

The earlier 'About us' page (Figure 4.21) is from a time when Mumsnet was considerably smaller, and the Internet was less ubiquitous (ca. 2000), so the digital divide in terms of access to resources was more pronounced. Indeed, MMDA is particularly useful in enabling a comparative analysis of changes over time in the appearance of websites. Throughout the time of analysis (2012-2013) the Mumsnet font remained the same as the earlier logo, but in the latter the words 'mums' and 'net' are separated by being different colours – dark grey and white respectively. This separation of the two words is perhaps indicative of a time prior to Mumsnet being a known brand, and there being a need to emphasise that the website was a place for mums. The strapline features on the right side of the page and uses capital letters for 'By' as well as 'For' – giving equal weight to those who created the platform and those who use it. The colour scheme is different - the main colour is greenish beige, there is notably no pink, there is some light blue and purple in the lines under the top that still featured as the main colour scheme at the time of analysis.

This older 'About us' page is more visibly personalised by featuring a photograph of the founders with their young children. Both founders are referred to by name and their occupations are specified. It is notable that their meeting at antenatal classes is foregrounded here, 'the other mums in *our* antenatal group' being 'the best source of information on everything from sleep problems to choosing first shoes'. Adopting a historical lens in this analysis emphasizes the degree to which the current personal narratives of the founders may dictate the tone of the website. Their experience at that time of having babies and younger children is reflected in the centrality of the child here, whereas the 'About us' page cited 'not just holidays but all the other stuff parents talk about'. This second change to the 'About us' page suggests that Mumsnet now aims for a broader, more inclusive, appeal.

Whilst the central place afforded the antenatal group in the earlier 'About Us' page is clearly reflective of the stage that the founders were then living through as parents, it also indicates that Mumsnet's genesis is more complex than the singular founding holiday story suggests. There



are several phrases in the early 'About Us' page that tell of Mumsnet growing directly out of a more exclusive clique of first-time mothers in the real world, 'our gang' being especially indicative. The inclusion of the phrase, '(where to go for a week in the sun with full childcare in November stumped us all)' - tellingly appearing in parentheses –appeals only to those who could afford such a thing, and so restricts the identities available for potential users to take up. The phrase, 'know-how on the net' speaks of an emphasis on the pooling of knowledge about parenting over generic support, which continues on the current version of Mumsnet. That the antenatal group that forms the central narrative on the early 'About Us' page (Figure 4.21) does not feature at all on the current one (Figure 4.20) again demonstrates that the founding narrative continues to be developed. As the older 'About Us' page comes from a time before Mumsnet had a brand identity to uphold it is arguable that it likely presents a less considered and less edited narrative of Mumsnet's origins. The absence of adverts on the older page is also notable.



Figure 4.21: Early Mumsnet 'About us' page

#### 4.3.2: Netmums

There are two images featured on the 'About us' page of Netmums (Figure 4.22) – the logo depicting the group of brightly coloured figures linking hands appears at the top left, and a photograph of the three Netmums founders gathered around a computer monitor with their children towards the bottom right of the page – notably similar to the one used on Mumsnet's older page (Figure 4.21). The colour of the font is mainly black, and light purple for headings and links to other pages and sections. The information given on the page foregrounds local physical place: 'your *local* Netmums site'; the 'core values that we believe in'; Netmums campaigns; and 'our valuable *Parent Support Service*'. The terms 'valuable Parent Support Service' implies not only support but a particular service model of support as central to Netmums.

The overall tone of the page and the inclusion of a group photograph of the founders with their children constructs Netmums as friendly with a familiar human face, stating '... you can get to know us a bit better on this page'. There is not a narrated founding story featured prominently and there is no named protagonist, although the 'full story' can be clicked through to on a different page. Netmums is described as a single entity - 'What is Netmums?' – the answer is 'a *family* of *local* sites that *cover the UK*, each site offering information to mothers on everything from where to find playgroups and how to eat healthily to where to meet other mothers'. There is an informational tone to this – 'where to,' 'how to,' – and the website is framed as existing to complement 'real world' communities. 'Netmums' is described as 'also available offline too with the publication of eight books', which are available for users to purchase / read. It is notably emphasised that 'Our books respond to the practical needs of real mothers who juggle increasingly busy lives, and offer support and guidance for those times when it's difficult to cope with the demands of family life.' Thus, there is a narrative of consumption of prescribed advice about parenting. The emphasis that Netmums is a place for every parent – though the term 'mother' is used more frequently – is further foregrounded in the 'our mission is' section: 'To make it

unnecessary for any mum to feel lonely or isolated'; 'To make sure every parent has access to all of the local support and advice available – from other mothers and from professionals.' There is an intertextual relationship between collective identity, real world support connected with locality, and the Netmums logo in the answer provided under the subtitle,

'Who are the Netmums?

From humble beginnings in 2000, if all the members of Netmums now joined hands they would more than span the 874 miles from Land's end to John O' Groats!

A visual metaphor of physical connection foregrounds a narrative of real world communication and support. The privileging of collective over individual identity is further highlighted in some of the 'fun facts' at the bottom of the 'About Us' page, 'Netmums collectively have more than 1,600,000 children', 'Tuna pasta bake is our all time favourite recipe with in excess of 80,000 downloads a year!' This is noteworthy as Tuna pasta bake is widely known as one of the cheapest meals (Knight, O'Connell, & Brannen, 2014). While the focus of this analysis was the 'About Us' page itself, it is notable that clicking the 'read the full story...' link includes this summary of Netmums' 'key philosophies',

'... to support parents through (sic) the hard times, offer reliable advice to parents struggling with conditions such as PND and to stop parents placing unrealistic expectations on themselves so they can enjoy parenthood, not feel burdened by it.'

Here we see foregrounded social support and 'the hard times' - the need for advice for particular conditions, namely Post Natal Depression, is constructed as inextricably linked with the experience of being a parent.

## About Us



Whether you're a Netmums 'Newbie' or a seasoned visitor you can get to know us a bit better on this page.

Read about your local Netmums site, and how it works, the core values that we believe in and the campaigns we've spear-headed over the years. You can also

find out about our valuable [Parent Support Service](#) and how we help thousands of mums each month.

- [What is Netmums?](#)
- [Who are we?](#)
- [Our books](#)
- [How your local site works](#)
- [What you'll find on your local site](#)
- [Our campaigns, media and patrons](#)

### Quick Links

- [Netmums campaigns](#)
- [Netmums in the media](#)
- [Our blog](#)
- [What people say about us](#)
- [Find a local site](#)
- [Our use of cookies](#)

## So what is Netmums?

Founded in 2000 Netmums is the UK's fastest-growing online parenting organisation with over 1.2 million members and 5 million visits. Netmums is a [family of local sites](#) that cover the UK, each site offering information to mothers on everything from where to find playgroups and how to eat healthily to where to meet other mothers. The local sites are backed by a wealth of parenting articles that start with pregnancy and follow through each stage of childhood helping mums to enjoy a happy and healthy family life.

Netmums is also available offline too with the publication of eight books. Our books respond to the practical needs of real mothers who juggle increasingly busy lives, and offer support and guidance for those times when it's difficult to cope with the demands of family life.

## Our mission is:

- To help families have fun with and enjoy their children
- To bring people together to make our local communities more lively and friendly
- To make it unnecessary for any mum to feel lonely or isolated
- To make sure every parent has access to all of the local support and advice available - from other mothers and from professionals
- To give mothers a voice, locally and nationally, on issues of importance to them

## Who are the Netmums?

From humble beginnings in 2000, if all the members of Netmums now joined hands they would more than span the 874 miles from Land's end to John O' Groats!

[Read the full story of Netmums here...](#)



## Some fun facts that might surprise you:

- Over 5 million unique people visit Netmums every month
- Netmums collectively have more than 1,600,000 children
- 340,000 mums have made real life friends having first [met on Netmums](#)
- There are more than 473 [Meetup](#) organisers all around the country
- There are 217,371 local listings in [Places to go](#)
- We have 85 Team Netmums staff working behind the scenes
- [Tuna pasta bake](#) is our all time favourite recipe with in excess of 80,000 downloads a year!
- Our [Parent Supporters](#) have helped more than 6 million people

Figure 4.22: Netmums 'About us' page

#### **4.4: Conclusion: Similarities and Differences**

During the period of analysis both websites underwent minimal changes in their overall appearance. This suggests that both have brand identities to uphold. Being of the same genre both Netmums and Mumsnet adhere to particular design rules and expectations in the layout of their homepages. Both adopted the principles of a traditionally western left-right, top-bottom reading path and were laid out somewhat like newspaper websites. This was accentuated on Mumsnet where writing was especially dominant and through its use of headline stories at the top of the page.

Users of Netmums and Mumsnet are similarly implicated through competitions and discounts relating to brands advertised by the websites. This emphasizes the commodification of modern parenting and the notion of branded parenting identities. Mumsnet was also seen to incorporate topical cultural symbols into its design relating to current events, such as the Olympics, thus positioning itself as capturing the zeitgeist. The webpages analysed suggest that Mumsnet and Netmums have seemingly different relationships to wider culture – for example Netmums aligning itself more with governmental agendas such as through their United Kindmums campaign that spoke to the Conservative's 'Big Society' discourse, while Mumsnet hosts live webchats with politicians and campaigns on issues such as better miscarriage care and the sexualisation of young girls.

While both websites foreground a discourse of social community, they do so with different emphases. It is noteworthy that Mumsnet use the term 'talk' for their discussion forum, whereas the discussion forum on Netmums is separated into 'chat' and 'support' sections – at the time of analysis the support one being termed the 'drop in clinic'. The terms 'talk' and 'chat' are different – the former connoting seriousness and possibly talking therapies, while 'chat' implies a less meaningful activity. Having 'support' as a separate section implies that peer-to-peer chatting may not be supportive and reifies and medicalises the concept of support that goes on in 'the drop-in clinic'.

The dominant discourse on Mumsnet's homepage is of peer-to-peer advice. A concurrent discourse of consumption serves to complement the dominant social discourse, suggesting the availability of a particular branded parenting identity for potential users to consume, participate in and reproduce. This speaks to the notion of the neoliberal social imaginary cited on p. 48-9 – in particular the potential for commercial marketing messages to infiltrate parenting practices and identities. It might be argued that Mumsnet has become such an influential cultural force that there is now a Mumsnet discourse of parenting – the fact that 'Mumsnetter' is now widely used as an identity descriptor for those who use the site is perhaps emblematic of this. This echoes Thomson et al.'s (2011) recent narrative study suggesting distinct cultures of childrearing develop from an increasing convergence of practices of consumption and maternal identity, compounding socio-economic differences. Certainly, the normative ideals suggested by the dominant discourses on Mumsnet's homepage are that its users will be educated, literate and perhaps of a distinct social class. 'Mumsnetters' are not wholly defined by their identity as parents but have other identities that are reproduced through, among other things, their consumption of and participation in Mumsnet. Connected to this, it is noteworthy that in my analysis Mumsnet was positioned as an authoritative voice and as brand leader among UK parenting websites.

The multimodal ensemble of both websites suggests a normative ideal of mothers as prime carers as parenting is constructed as primarily a female domain. In the case of Mumsnet this is despite the strapline, 'By parents for parents'. The use of the term 'parent' here may be seen as being complicit with and reinforcing a gendered discourse of parenting. This is supported by previous research suggesting that parenting forums reinforce existing societal power relations (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Pedersen & Smithson, 2010).

While my fourth research question included investigating the websites' constructions of racialization and sexuality, these discourses were notable by their absence in the multimodal ensembles of the websites that I examined. This absence points to implicit discourses of

heteronormativity and whiteness in these websites' visual displays, and by extension a lack of engagement with diversity. Certainly, the photographs of children and parents featured in the sample of homepages I analysed were overwhelmingly white, thus suggesting that whiteness is taken for granted in these spaces.

While Mumsnet purports to be an autonomous space for peer-to-peer advice, discourses of top-down professional 'knowledge' about parenting are arguably still embedded in the reproduction of societal power relations on its homepage. The notion of 'pooling knowledge' is central to Mumsnet and, privileged over 'advice' and 'support', implying that the website is for those who have knowledge worth sharing. The phrase originally used on the website to describe its function - 'sharing 'know-how on the net' – suggesting that it was set up to tap into existing communities.

The notion of tapping into existing communities is even more central to Netmums – in many ways the website being constructed as a complement to or enhancement of 'real world' community and support. Indeed, on Netmums an intertextual relationship was seen between dominant discourses of collective identity, real world physical locality and support according to a top-down professional service model. A bright and positive image of family and the child is central to the Netmums brand – being embedded in the child-friendly appeal of the choices of colours and images for example. Cartoon images feature heavily on the website and these generally depict physical activities and objects relating to a homely, local and child-friendly family atmosphere – such as playgrounds, messy painting, and the 'welcome' sign. These features foreground a discourse of child-centred motherhood over individual womanhood.

The narratives on the 'About us' pages of the websites foreground different identities – Netmums framed as a place for every parent with a singular collective identity connected to physical location, while Mumsnet is grounded in a personal experiential narrative of one of their managers, thus privileging individual identity. Changes to the 'About us' page of

Mumsnet suggest that the narrative is still being worked on and adapted. While Netmums foreground sameness in their narrative identity - constructing motherhood as an all-encompassing identity that can be taken up by 'every parent' - Mumsnet foreground selfhood, individual adult identities privileged over parenting or maternal identities, thus positioning itself as distinct from other similar spaces in the process. Again, Mumsnet can be seen as a proponent of a neoliberal social imaginary here – particularly in the connoting of self-interest and self-reliance with human freedom.



## **Chapter 5: The websites' origins and framing: Managers' narratives**

### **5.1: Introduction**

This chapter analyses the narratives of parenting and social support told by managers and founders of Mumsnet and Netmums, continuing the framing of the websites as orchestrated discursive ensembles employed in Chapter four. I explore these individuals' narrative constructions of the websites' brand identities, and consider their identities and sense-making practices. I also explore the two websites' differing approaches to moderating their forums, having interviewed a member of the support teams from each. This analysis was created from loosely structured interviews carried out by telephone, email and over Skype between February 2013 and October 2013. Over two individual interviews, firstly a telephone interview and then an email interview where the questions were sent ahead, one of the co-founders of Netmums (SR), and Mumsnet co-founder (JR), told me about their respective websites and their geneses.

The aim in this chapter is to provide further insights into the discourses that underpin popular online social support for parents. I examine linkages and oppositions between canonical narratives of 'parenting' and social support foregrounded by those who manage and moderate the websites, and their personal narratives of parenting.

Research questions guiding the narrative analysis of the manager interviews were:

What narratives of 'parenting' and social support are foregrounded in telephone and email interviews with the managers and moderators of the websites?

- In what ways are managers' personal narratives of parenting reflective of or in opposition to canonical narratives of 'parenting'?
- How are social class, gender and ethnicity constructed in the managers' narratives?
- How far are discourses of top-down professional 'knowledge' about 'parenting' visible in managers' and moderators' narratives?

After defining some theoretical perspectives that informed the analysis of these interviews, key narratives will be presented case-by-case beginning with Mumsnet manager JR, then Netmums manager SR. The salient features of each of their narratives are subtitled into sections covering; Founding stories; Day to day management; Social Class; Gender; Moderation and support. The chapter concludes with a cross-case comparison of salient narratives from the interviews.

## **5.2: Analysis**

As detailed in Chapter Three I took a narrative-analytic approach to analysing data from these interviews. I paid particular attention to intertextual links between narratives told in temporally synchronous telephone interviews and asynchronous email interviews, the two interviewee's narratives, and accepted canonical narratives. In line with my multiple epistemological standpoints I drew on a range of theories in my narrative analysis of each manager's interview data. Useful concepts included Ricoeur's (1991) theories relating to fictional narrative and drama - in particular his interconnected concepts of emplotment, narrative identity and discordant concordance, as well as other concepts such as social positioning, interpellation and governmentality (Chapter Three). Other concepts deployed in the following analysis are: Tellability – the notion that to be 'tellable' in interaction narratives should be humorous, new, performative and shared (Ochs & Capps, 2001); It should also be

noted here again that the narratives analysed from these interviews were elicited accounts in response to questions (Riessman, 1997).

I paid particular attention in the following analysis to concepts explicated in Bruner's (1990) folk psychology. He argues that all cultures have this folk psychology, or common sense, and that it is a powerful instrument that constitutes normative expectations both of how our own and others' minds work, as well as possible modes of social action. Counter to the computational metaphor of cognition, which privileges biology in the shaping of human psychology, in folk psychology human psychology and sociology are culturally shaped, Bruner arguing that the organising principle of any given culture is narrative. Particular concepts that informed the following analysis are that narrative has an inherent sequentiality – being 'composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters' (p.43) which are only given meaning through their place in the overall sequence, or plot; the simultaneous expression of canonicity and exceptionality in narrative – 'The function of the story is to find an intentional state that ... makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern' (Bruner, 1990, p.49). It is the tension between expected cultural norms and departures from them that make narratives – factually indifferent as they are - meaningful and give them verisimilitude; In order to justify a given narrative as canonical, speakers may deploy devices such as Quantifiers ('everybody does that') and/or deontic modals ('that's what you're supposed to do'); Dual landscape – where the 'real world' is presented as linked with mental events in the individual telling the story; Framing, which involves the crystallising / altering of experience in memory to either conform to canonical narratives or emphasise as exceptional to the canonical.

### **5.3: Mumsnet**

Two interviews were conducted with Mumsnet manager JR: The first telephone interview took place in February 2013 and lasted for just

over twenty minutes; Follow-up email interview questions were sent in April 2013 and answers sent back to me in May 2013.

At the time of the interview in February 2013, Mumsnet co-founder and manager JR was aged 46, married with four children – two twin girls aged 14 and two sons, one aged 10 and the other aged 7 - and living in London. Before setting up Mumsnet in 2000 she worked as a freelance sports journalist and economist.

### **5.3.1: Founding stories of Mumsnet**

In the first (telephone) interview, I began by exploring the origins of the website,

JW: ...I just wondered if you could tell me the story of how Mumsnet came into being, really- just=

JR: =Yeah-so, back in 1999 I was um I actually booked a holiday for me and my one ye-nearly one year old twins, um and my husband and it was supposedly a very family friendly holiday. It was the first holiday we'd taken with kids and um we went on this holiday and we basically realised we had gone to the wrong destination, in the wrong country in the wrong time zone and the so-called child-friendly resort wasn't and everyone was moaning their choice when we got there and I just basically thought it would have been nice to find out about this before we left and there's this new thing called the internet where people can swap advice and tap into each others' experience and if you can do that for holidays then maybe you can do it for all these things around the parenting sphere that none of us are really trained for and we essentially crave information from people who have been there and done that, and that's- that's really all it was.'

Here JR retells and fleshes out the Mumsnet founding story that appears publicly on Mumsnet, imbuing it with more dramatic qualities for me as a singular audience. She does not deviate from the narrative given on the 'About us' page (Chapter 4, Figure 4.19) but does provide supplementary detail - setting up the characters (*dramatis personae*) at the beginning as well as framing the narrative temporally, 'back in 1999'. The way she tells the story communicates that she is thinking about it carefully as she retells it. For example, her correcting of herself when she states the age of her 'one ye-nearly one-year-old twins' indicates that the accuracy and exactness of her account are important to her. She uses repetition in the form of a three-part list that emphasises and renders rhetorical the tragi-comedy of the disastrous holiday - everything about the experience going wrong - 'we basically realised we had gone to the *wrong* destination, in the *wrong* country in the *wrong* timezone...' - this also sets up the notion that there is a 'right' holiday destination, and furthermore implies that Mumsnet can help families go to the right places. The use of this three-part list and her employment of extreme case formulations, 'everyone was moaning...' is journalistic in that it adds drama and veracity to her account but remains vague in terms of specific quantification – no other characters are named, it is simply 'everyone'. JR's assertion that 'everyone' felt as she did also positions her experience as commonplace, the implication being that it is canonical in relation to family life. Positioning 'everyone' as feeling as she did thus gives her narrative a verisimilitude that makes it difficult to question. In fact, JR is speaking in a restricted code that assumes the audience – myself as the interviewer in this case - understands regardless of their experience. A phrase in her narrative which serves to give it meaning outside her own subjective account is, '...everyone was moaning their choice *when we got there* and I basically thought it would have been nice to find out about this before we left...' This is a key phrase in terms of sequentiality and temporality: First, the ideal sequence that would be to talk to parents first and then go on holiday switches; Second, her retelling of Mumsnet's founding story in the first person offers evidence that it was not only JR and her family who experienced difficulties but that others had before her family arrived and,

moreover, would have been available to tell her about it. It was not an individual experience but a collective one and it frames JR's personal experience as emblematic of that constituency of parents.

### ***Emplotment and Narrative identity – entrepreneurialism***

During JR's response to my first question, there is a temporal and spatial shift in the narrative from the world of the holiday where her 'lightbulb' moment occurred, to that of 'the internet' and wider parenting culture - 'all these things around the parenting sphere'. Within the narrative this shift from the experience of the disastrous holiday and her idea to harness 'this new thing called the internet' for parents to swap advice are presented as seamlessly following one after the other in a causal sequence. Thus, a version of what happened is composed, framing events as logical at the expense of chronological accuracy. The founding story of Mumsnet constructed by JR has tellability – in the sense that it is performative and compelling. As seen in exploring its developing 'About Us' pages in the previous chapter the founding story of Mumsnet continues to be worked on, it may, therefore, have become increasingly synthetic in its retelling. I mean 'synthetic' here in the sense of Ricoeur's (1991) definition, as pertaining to the transformative role that emplotment plays in synthesising heterogeneous events and incidents into a coherent and unified story.

JR also constructs the setting up of Mumsnet as innovative and sparked by her entrepreneurial initiative in response to a common cultural experience – families with young children being let down on holiday and their needs not adequately catered for. As the protagonist who does not simply accept this as a culturally expected narrative but instead takes action, JR also imbues Mumsnet with a heroic identity constructed from her own experience. A reversal characteristic of complex plots in fiction and drama whereby the plot takes a turn for the worse following a tragic mistake (harmatia), takes place (Aristotle, 1996). However, JR's narrative has a double reversal of fortune. The tragic mistake in her story comes

nearer the beginning with the protagonist's realisation that she has booked a 'disastrous holiday'. While this mistake is framed as tragic, it is also framed as a collective experience of that community of holidaymakers who all made the same mistake. Yet it is JR who has the initiative to transform the adverse experience of failure, of what ideally should have been a treasured experience – the first family holiday - into something profitable – not necessarily financially but in terms of knowledge and cultural capital. JR's fortunes and, by extension, the fortunes of the 'community' of disgruntled holidaymakers, who serve here as symbolic precursors of the Mumsnet community, are reversed for the better. JR – and by extension Mumsnet – is the one with the initiative to put the world to rights and make it as it *ought* to be, conceptualised by Bruner (1990) as the deontic modal.

Through 'the universalizing of the plot' (Ricoeur, 1991) the characters are afforded verisimilitude, imbuing *them* with universality, at least for the audience of similar social and cultural disposition - in this case aspiring middle-class, professional mothers who use Mumsnet. The founding story is made available as a story for others to learn from who recognise something of themselves in the narrative identity of JR and Mumsnet, or who aspire to be mothers of that kind. By positioning herself unequivocally as the chief protagonist in this narrative JR becomes the spokesperson for the wider Mumsnet community she is creating. This is also clear from her visibility in the media as the face of Mumsnet, and her willingness to present a version of her personal life and familial relationships through this forum.

### ***Founder to manager***

It is not only in narrating the founding story that JR positions herself as the chief protagonist, but also in her recounting of the day-to-day management of Mumsnet. In the first telephone interview when asked, 'In terms of the design of the site, choice of colours, how involved are you in that side of things?' JR replied, 'Completely and utterly involved. I mean

no decision about design gets taken without it going through me.’ Later in the interview when she was explaining to me how design decisions are made in more detail, this exchange took place,

‘JW: So nothing’s signed off without going through you? Ok-

JR: -And we will often involve the Mumsnet users in it as well so at an early stage we might get a group of them to have a look at it and give their feedback and then we’ll release a beta, I mean this is if it’s a big change and um we get more feedback. So the idea is that nothing is really ever set in stone until it’s gone through the whole audience really  
(*laughing*)

JW: Ok, so are there kind of key users- are there a core of users-?

JR: Well we- I mean no- I mean we have a panel, we have a Mumsnet insight panel. People who’ve said ‘Yes I’d be prepared to do insight pieces of work for brands’ but also we can call on them for stuff for us as well. So there are about 3000 of those, but I mean the main point is, you know, I don’t suddenly wake up in the morning and say ‘Oh let’s make it green and it goes green’. It’s a collective thing with the users because it’s their site and effectively it would be like changing the wallpaper in their house and we wouldn’t do it.’

JR is keen to emphasise here that Mumsnet is user-led – ‘By parents for parents’ as their strapline says. The visual metaphor ‘... *it would be like changing the wallpaper in their house*’ is especially striking as it speaks to a narrative of a strong community with a sense of collective, shared identity and similar orientations in everyday tastes and practices. JR’s managerial position may also serve here as an emblem of aspiration for a



wider social group with a degree of potential power, resources and control over their own lives.

### **5.3.2: Social Class**

#### ***Assumptions of shared middle class aspirations and practices***

The Mumsnet founding story of ‘the disastrous holiday’ positions the website as a place for those who have the material capital to feel entitled to a ‘family friendly holiday’. Furthermore, Mumsnet is framed by JR as the place where wisdom and knowledge about parenting can be produced through the swapping of advice based on the individual experiences of users and, collectively, develop into a trusted ‘common-sense’ for the constituency popularly referred to as ‘Mumsnetters’. In this way ‘swapping wisdom about holidays’ is framed as a normal expectation for these parents, demonstrating that Mumsnet is constructed around middle class aspirations and practices. This was exemplified when mid-way through the telephone interview I asked JR, ‘what about how the forum compares with other parenting advice and support such as children’s centres or health visitors?’ She replied,

‘Well, it’s peer-to-peer so you know I think on Mumsnet you’ll get very honest advice on Mumsnet. I think that’s partly because it’s anonymous so people can be really truly honest, they ask honest questions, they respond honestly to those questions. It’s also quite intelligent. You’re very unlikely for anything factually wrong to go unchallenged on Mumsnet. I’m not sure that’s true of all these environments sometimes (*laughing*). That’s probably true still and that’s just because the audience is pretty intelligent and educated and- yeah I mean I think that’s probably- I mean I don’t know if you’ve had any experience of using it, but it can be very funny and I think that that’s something that surprises people that mothers can be funny... um it makes me laugh on a

daily basis. So it's probably wit, intelligence and honesty is probably what I'd like to say were the defining characteristics.'

While JR never mentions it explicitly, social class is implicit in the language and terms used. In her investigation of social class, Skeggs (2004; 2011) draws on Bromley's (2000) notion of 'euphemistic transference of class', to argue that class may not be directly spoken about but a classed personhood is rather constructed through other concepts such as 'the self'. She argues that the self is 'part of a system of exchange in which classed personhood is produced via different technologies, for example narration for legal claims-making' (Skeggs, 2004, p. 5). By offering 'defining characteristics' of what she refers to as Mumsnet's 'audience' JR constructs an identity for an online community that speaks to middle-class aspirations, intelligence and education. The data provided to me over email by JR from the Mumsnet census 2011 shows 72% of users are educated to degree level or beyond. It is noteworthy that JR equates intelligence with education and factual knowledge and positions the knowledge environment of Mumsnet against other spaces that are left unnamed. By desiring the trilogy – 'wit, intelligence and honesty' – another three-part list - to be seen as the defining characteristics of Mumsnet, JR sidelines other online spaces for parents by implication. In responding to the question comparing Mumsnet with other parenting advice and support she explicitly positions Mumsnet against other parenting websites and universal parent support in the real world – 'I'm not sure that's true of all these environments'. By doing so she privileges the interests of a particular constituency of parents, establishing an authoritative counter-narrative for Mumsnet through differentiating their 'audience' from others. Here again, Skeggs' work is relevant – in particular the notion that class is forged indirectly through perspectives on other issues including culture and economics. For example, the 'possessive individual' is a concept originally defined through the capacity to own property (Lury, 1998; Strathern, 1999). The 'possessive individual' is representative of a group whose perspective is privileged through their

‘access to circuits of symbolic distribution’ and who are able to legitimate their own interests and establish authority by defining themselves against the ‘mass’. Central to the reproduction and establishment of the ‘possessive individual’ as the normative and natural ideal was the attribution of moral value to themselves through the promotion of particular perspectives through particular techniques such as biography and scientific discourse. Being institutionalised in law through the concept of the rights-bearing individual led to the shaping of different class formations such as that of an immoral and unruly working-class ‘mass’ incapable of being individuals (Skeggs, 2004).

After JR gave me her initial narrative of the founding of Mumsnet, which reiterated the information given on the website, I probed for more detail, asking ‘So it was really that one particular experience? You hadn’t-’ she replied,

‘That was-yeah exactly, that was the kind of light bulb. I mean obviously, I’d joined an antenatal class when I’d got pregnant and I’d continued to meet up with that group and the reason we continued to meet up was simply so we could share and swap and advise each other on things that were never really, you know we’d been trained for, so the principle of it was simply to extend that advice stuff by being able to-doing it online from the comfort of your own home and tapping into a bigger pool of wisdom.’

This second story of the antenatal group buttresses the veracity of JR’s main founding story of Mumsnet. She draws on a recognised middle-class canonical narrative of parenting featured on the older ‘About Us’ page (Chapter 4, Figure 4.21) – e.g. *obviously* attending antenatal classes – that she assumes makes sense to me. JR’s opening acknowledgement, ‘yeah *exactly*’, does important interactional work as it serves to emphasise that co-construction is inherent in interaction, bringing me into her narrative. This phrase also interrupts what she says next about ‘the

disastrous holiday' being the 'light bulb', indicating that she is not going to let the primary founding story of Mumsnet be downplayed. JR goes on to provide some background by drawing in canonical narratives of parenting and social support, '*obviously* I'd joined an *antenatal* class when I'd got pregnant'. Here the narrative of 'parenting' and social support foregrounded is told from the perspective of a particular community which JR takes-for-granted have both the desire and the resources to share trustworthy advice based on their own experiences; she uses the terms 'share and swap and advise each other'. Temporally this form of sociality (as well as the 'disastrous holiday') are framed as assumed shared experiences and understandings from which Mumsnetters may propel themselves forwards 'from the comfort of your own home and tap into a bigger pool of wisdom' as they have not been 'trained' to parent. By foregrounding peer-to-peer online communication, JR positions Mumsnetters as those in possession of the knowledge to train one another. The framing of parenting as a set of learnable skills also links with the emphasis placed on professional life on Mumsnet. Indeed, in the follow-up email interview, JR told another, second story from the perspective of her own experiences of being a working mother, which the next section focuses on.

### ***Gender and work***

Gender and class intersect to produce an overarching narrative of empowerment involving individual progress through the dynamic seizing of opportunities in order to gain capital of various kinds, in particular relating to the workplace. The follow-up email interview began with the question, 'How is the story of Mumsnet reflective of your own story as a parent?' to which JR replied,

'Before I became a parent, I worked in very male-dominated environments in the City and as a football writer, and I watched the women around me feel pressured to pretend their kids didn't exist in order to progress. I founded

Mumsnet so that I no longer had to pretend my family didn't matter in order to get on.'

This narrative is part personal, a biography, part experiential journey, and partly about social action and agency. She tells about her previous employment in 'very male-dominated environments', cultural symbols of masculinity - 'football' and 'the City' – foregrounding a discursive link between gender and work. She then positions herself as an observer reflecting on the harsh position society puts women in. These constructions of audience and emotion lend the narrative dramatic quality. She ends with an unambiguous statement regarding her motivation to set up Mumsnet, expressing her refusal to accept the canonical narrative of the incompatibility of being a dedicated mother and progressing in one's career, 'I founded Mumsnet so that I no longer had to pretend my family didn't matter in order to get on'. In this statement JR stakes a claim to a particular identity that has arguably become emblematic of the collective identity of Mumsnet - that of a woman who is ambitious and successful both professionally and as a mother. The implication that, before Mumsnet, working (professional) mothers who wanted to succeed in the labour market had to make a choice between their families and their careers casts JR as an exemplary hero facing up to persistent gender inequalities and campaigning for equal rights. Here again she is framed as defying and exceptional to the status quo. The relationship between temporality and gender thus serves a key function in this cleverly constructed narrative: While JR's personal narrative was in a sense always a counter-narrative, being a female in male-dominated environment, Mumsnet can be framed as part of an on going counter-narrative to the canonical because it was 'Before I became a parent' that JR worked in those traditionally masculine environments. The founding of Mumsnet is framed as a cathartic act - a new beginning that inspires solidarity and the possibility of career success as an individual *and* emotional involvement as a mother. Notably, JR's narrative of having to negotiate her gendered identity as a mother around her professional identity in male-dominated environments chimes with research into female

managers of masculine workplaces such as factories tailoring their gender identities accordingly (Holmes, 2006).

### ***'Parenting' or 'mothering'?***

While in the extract above JR is writing explicitly about her experience of being a working mother and its pivotal influence on her decision to found the website they decided to call Mumsnet, during the interviews she used the term 'parent' more often than 'mother'. Yet within the same response she refers to watching 'women around me feel(ing) pressured to pretend their kids didn't exist in order to progress'. By using the term 'parent' instead of 'mother', and 'women' in the same sentence, JR's narrative demonstrates that the term 'parent', rather than being gender-neutral, is in fact often assumed to denote 'mother'. This is noteworthy as Mumsnet emphasise the term 'parent' in their strapline, 'By parents for parents', JR singling this out during the telephone interview. Responding to my question, 'What about how did it come to be called Mumsnet?' she replied,

'Well we sat around the table and batted around a lot of names including Parentnet but, (*laughs*), we sort of thought that sounded a bit clunky, so the way we got round the gender thing was our strapline is 'by parents for parents' and we thought Mumsnet was clearer and we wanted something that did what it said on the tin so actually it's interesting you know obviously it wasn't everyone's strategy – Amazon didn't do what it says on the tin and Google didn't do what it said on the tin, but for us I think we didn't have a marketing budget, we wanted people to be cl- (*laughs*) roughly what this might be about or who it was for but we always have slightly struggled with the idea of not wanting to exclude fathers from the thing and we've got round that by using the strapline and by essentially you know you don't have to

show your credentials at the door of Mumsnet, you can join  
and you don't have to say what gender you are...'

In expressing a wish to get around gender, neutralising it through the website's strapline, Justine displays ambivalence towards gender identity. Yet she goes on to state 'Mumsnet was clearer' and that they 'wanted something that did what it said on the tin', which expresses quite emphatically that the website *is* designed primarily as an environment for 'mums', so this arguably conflicts with their wish to neutralise gender. Whereas in the telephone interview JR used the term 'gender neutral' in relation to design choices, in the follow-up email interview she chose not to refer directly to gender at all when asked why blue had been chosen as the main colour. Instead she wrote that Mumsnet is 'about not being fluffy and rose-tinted' and is here 'to tell it as it is', again using the term 'parenting' in what may be interpreted as an ambivalent position in both rejecting and accepting canonical gender roles – 'to not look at parenting through rose-tinted glasses'. JR's eschewal of nostalgia or sentimentality in relation to parenting expresses a practical, no-nonsense narrative of seizing opportunity that speaks to a bigger societal narrative of modernisation relating to new technology and society (Davis, 2013), which is also indicated in her description of having a 'light bulb' moment – 'this amazing new thing the internet'. JR's positioning of Mumsnet alongside web giants 'Google' and 'Amazon' is striking. By directly associating Mumsnet with these leading, multi-billion-dollar business brands she marks out Mumsnet's brand identity as dominant and pioneering. Rather than a neutralisation of gender per se, JR's narrative can also be understood as a challenge to canonical constructions of gender roles and the maternal through constructing 'alternative femininities' through Mumsnet (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). Indeed, when telling me more about how design choices are made in the telephone interview JR said,

'We were reacting against the slightly sort of soft-focus fluffy  
pink parenting style mag with beautiful super models and I  
mean it's supposed to be real and reflective of real people.'

Here she states explicitly that Mumsnet was set up as an intentional alternative to the canonical in parenting advice and style at the time. This notion of representing real women rather than providing a sanitised version of motherhood and parenting also feeds into an alternative empowering narrative that operates *for* parents.

### **5.3.3: Moderation and Support on Mumsnet**

The centrality of anonymous peer-to-peer communication to Mumsnet was exemplified by JR's response in the telephone interview to my question about how the forum compares with real world support such as health visitors and children's centres, quoted above. As noted in the previous chapter, the empowering narrative of support and how Mumsnet operates *for* users pertains primarily to the peer-to-peer virtual world and is less related to geographically specific 'real world' local communities which were foregrounded on Netmums. As noted, JR equated anonymous peer-to-peer communication with 'honest advice, intelligence and wit'. These 'defining characteristics' of peer-to-peer, honest advice and intelligence were echoed in a short Skype interview I conducted with one of Mumsnet's team of moderators in October 2013. When I asked, 'Is your role a supportive role?' she replied,

'Well – Mumsnet's um kind of overarching (.) philosophy is um- to help make parents' lives easier and one of the things we quote- and I use this quite a lot is that we think um- offering- them offering each other advice and support is essentially what we see as being sort of the highest function of Mumsnet but we emphasise the peer-to-peer model- er um that's really one-again- I would say one of the big differences between us and Netmums- not that there isn't peer-to-peer support on Netmums but for us that's kind of our USP – we don't as (.) site (.) administrators we are not



trained (.) to offer official support or advice in any aspect of parenting or health or anything like that.'

As JR did, the member of the community moderating team quotes the official Mumsnet 'philosophy' 'to help make parents' lives easier'. The moderator goes further than JR by contrasting Mumsnet explicitly with Netmums. This narrative of unofficial peer-to-peer support, described by the moderator as 'kind of our USP', is the key narrative of social support on Mumsnet, although it is notable that the above quote starts with an expert-client discourse – 'we think, offering – them' – before reproducing the Mumsnet 'philosophy'.

The reproduction of this key narrative, both in the form of direct quotation of the 'About us' page and across interviews with JR and a member of the moderation community, provides evidence that there is consistent branding of Mumsnet in their public narrative. The key social support narrative that Mumsnet is user-led and about the sharing of parents' own knowledge rather than any fixed philosophy or message about parenting is supported by JR's response to my question, 'What messages does Mumsnet want to communicate about being a parent?'

'Um... I'm not sure we want to communicate messages about being a parent. The purpose of Mumsnet is to make people's lives easier by pooling wisdom and knowledge so we're there to make- to be useful essentially because we believe some of the best advice you can get around anything actually, not just parenting, around anything, is from people who've been there and done that, so it's basically peer-to-peer collected wisdom that we are promoting- um or rather than promoting I would say facilitating is what we are doing essentially, we're creating a platform for people to be able to share swap support and make friends which is often as good as anything.'

In this passage, as at several points in both interviews, JR quotes key phrases from the 'About us' page, constructing a collective identity through using the plural personal pronoun 'we'. Mumsnet Headquarters as a collective become the protagonist here and this, combined with JR's declaration, 'I'm not sure we want to communicate messages about being a parent', constructs Mumsnet as having no 'party-line' as such but, rather, providing a platform for users to join. However, this apparent community is illusory to the extent that the very notion of 'creating a platform' has an air of exclusivity about it, as it can only be created with a particular group in mind – JR begins her response by quoting the website, "The purpose of Mumsnet is to make peoples' lives easier by pooling wisdom and knowledge so we're there to make- to be useful essentially'. The repetition of 'pooling wisdom and knowledge' again foregrounds a narrative of democratic social support that suggests equal access to resources is taken-for-granted, while at the same time speaking to a current political narrative privileging the neoliberal knowledge economy (Holmwood, 2014). The terms 'Knowledge' and 'wisdom' are privileged over the term 'support', which when it does appear at the end of the quote above is still in the context of exchange – 'share, swap support'. Here we see an archetypal Mumsnet user being constructed who is able to take up a position of knowledge rather than being positioned by others - as Skeggs (2004) writes, 'systems of knowing re-present the interests of particular groups' (p. 5).

Viewing Mumsnet from the perspective of power, there is arguably an embedded assumption that users necessarily possess a certain level of intellectual and rhetorical capital in order to participate actively on the website. The implication of this is that Mumsnet is socially exclusive, rather than a wholly inclusive space. I questioned whether parents with less knowledge capital are welcomed on Mumsnet in a follow-up email question regarding JR's stated defining qualities of Mumsnet as 'intelligence, wit and honesty',

JW: You described Mumsnet users as 'Intelligent, educated, honest and witty'. I wondered in what ways you feel this may reflect both the published and unpublished rules / etiquette expected on the forum, for example regarding posting in grammatically correct English?

JR: Every internet forum develops its own unofficial rules and language over time. Mumsnet's etiquette has grown organically, and reflects our users' views of how they would like the site to operate.

JW: What do you think are the effects of such etiquette?

JR: There's no entrance requirement for using Mumsnet. People feel comfortable in certain environments, and if they're not comfortable they won't choose to hang out there.'

Notably JR deploys a quantifier – 'every internet forum' – as a justificatory narrative rather than answering my question directly. By using the generic term 'people' rather than 'parents' or 'mothers', JR constructs a level playing field where all are equal. She again foregrounds that Mumsnet is user-led and that there is no fixed agenda or message, by stating 'Mumsnet's etiquette has grown organically, and reflects our users' views'. She also states emphatically that while there is no entrance requirement for using Mumsnet, it will not suit everybody. Mumsnet is constructed as democratic and open to all at the point of their engagement with the created online platform. This is important, as by framing Mumsnet in this way, JR and others at Mumsnet HQ cannot be implicated in any potential exclusion of people after that point. Although she alludes to the possibility of certain individuals being excluded, this is framed as unproblematic by keeping freedom of choice for all in the foreground, 'if they're not comfortable they won't choose to hang out there.' As well as speaking to notions of gentrification, this view can be seen to reflect the canonical narrative that Web 2.0 technologies are democratising, there being more

opportunity for internet access across social groups. However, it may also be indicative of a new digital divide opening up between those who do and those who do not possess particular rhetorical skills (Alstam, 2013). The key narrative here is one of unbounded freedom of choice but this is perhaps more troubling than JR concedes as if it *is* the case that Mumsnet occupy a position of relative power it could be argued that Mumsnet-use may serve as an indexing of authority open only to those 'in the know'.

#### **5.4: Netmums**

The stories SR, a co-founder of Netmums told were reflective of information given on the Netmums website, as was her style of narrating, which was detailed and delivered in a considered manner. The telephone interview took place in March 2013 and lasted just under one hour. Follow-up questions were sent over email in May 2013 with answers sent back in July 2013.

At the time of the interview in March 2013, Netmums co-founder and manager SR was aged 46, married with two teenage children and living in Watford. Before setting up Netmums in 2000 she worked as a University Lecturer and Research Fellow in Environmental Science.

##### **5.4.1: Founding stories of Netmums**

SR constructed her role as distinct from her co-founder whom she described as being primarily interested 'in all the sort of playgroups and all the toddler groups and classes and clubs'. By contrast she declared her interest as in 'the support side' - described as, 'different special educational needs, for depression, for alcohol, whatever it is- domestic violence'. She framed social support as pertaining to particular experiences of struggle. The framing of local activities as distinct from support – both in the interview and on the forum – relates to a canonical narrative wherein social support is related to a deficit-model of parenting.

After a brief discussion giving some background to my project the interview began,

‘JW – yeah can you tell me the story of how Netmums came into being?

SR – OK. So we started in 2000- so we launched the first website and it was aimed at being primarily providing help and support to local- to parents within their local community. So it was on the basis that we recognised that there was a need (.) when you become a mother you often feel very isolated, you don't really know about the places to go, the things to do and the stuff around you. There was myself and my co-founder had suffered with Post Natal Depression so I was very keen that we put support at the heart of what we were doing as well. So she had the idea that she wanted to create this opportunity for people to- um so we created lists of the places to go um and the you know activities that you wouldn't normally find (*laughs*) there was no council listings in those days or anything and- but we wanted it to be a cooperative thing, so the idea was the more experienced mothers who know about these things- and we didn't want it to be a directory so we wanted it to be very much something where people are sharing experiences, so it is a cooperative venture and um a community venture and that so we were asking people to write up about their experiences of going to a toddler group um (.) in the hope that that would then encourage other people to go along and you know feel that they are able to go because they know a bit about it before they turn up.’

Notably, SR frames the setting up of Netmums as filling a particular need for new mothers in the real world, who she characterised as lacking knowledge about where to go and what to do. In this way, new mothers are positioned as inherently vulnerable. The form in which the narrative is

expressed also suggests an acceptance of the canonical, for example, the repeated use of 'you' serving to personalise and thereby normalise the notion that motherhood is a time of struggle and vulnerability. SR moves seamlessly from 'you', denoting mothers in general, to her own and her co-founder's experiences with Post Natal Depression (PND). This framing of such a personal experience of illness alongside a cultural narrative of mothering defined by isolation and lack of knowledge projects PND as an everyday experience of first-time motherhood, normalizing the illness in the process. Indeed, their joint experience of struggling with this illness is constructed as the official founding story on the website itself, informing their 'key philosophies' as stated on a link from their 'About us' page (Chapter 4.3.2).

The interlinking of parenting and social support in Netmums' founding story speaks intertextually to self-help literature, positioning the website as a space where struggling parents can get reliable advice to relieve their suffering and help them to help themselves enjoy parenthood. SR's openness regarding her own experiences of illness served to emphasise the official narrative on the website, unifying it with her personal narrative.

SR's detailed response about Netmums' genesis continued,

'After about five years we then put the forum on the top – we decided that the forum um shouldn't be, we were aware by then, it took us a couple of years to become aware of Mumsnet – I know you've spoken to JR? We didn't want to be like Mumsnet because we could see that you know it was a different type of environment um so we were quite nervous and it took us a while to decide to put the forum in but the reason we did it was that we were realising that there were discussions that people were having that we used to characterise as 'should you have your baby in your bed or not?' 'The baby in the bed question' which people had a view on whether they lived in Orkney or Brighton – we were

in Orkney by then um so we tried a couple of discussion things on the site and people were very keen to you know express their views. But they'd talk in a supportive way about it.'

SR cites "the baby in the bed question" which people had a view on whether they lived in Orkney or Brighton' as characteristic of Netmums. Here she foregrounds physical 'real world' locality by choosing two ostensibly very different places - a retelling of the use of distant geographical places on the 'About Us' page (Chapter 4, Figure 4.22). Another key narrative for Netmums is foregrounded - that they are 'for every mum', though this also arguably homogenises parents. The notion that Netmums aims to be inclusive to all is contained in '...people were very keen to you know to express their views, but they'd talk in a supportive way about it'. SR constructs Netmums forum users here as free agents who express their opinions in an unequivocally supportive way, perhaps inviting an interpretation that others exist outside Netmums who may talk in a less supportive way. From a discursive analytic perspective SR's narrative of online parenting support here is seemingly designed to counter the perceived culturally dominant narrative of Mumsnet. Whilst it is not known that the imaginary others SR alludes to are Mumsnet-users, she did introduce it into our conversation early in the interview, albeit in the knowledge that I had spoken to JR on Mumsnet – which I had shared with her when I made initial contact. By mentioning Mumsnet by name SR explicitly constructed Netmum's brand identity in relation to and as distinct from Mumnet's, stating 'We didn't want to be like Mumsnet'. In describing Mumsnet as 'a different type of environment', and that she and her colleagues were nervous about putting a discussion forum on Netmums, she positioned Mumsnet as the more powerful of the two websites.

### ***Emplotment and narrative identity***

SR's construction of Netmums' identity in opposition to the more renowned Mumsnet also plays a crucial function in the plot of the Netmums' founding story. It may be the case that Mumsnet has become the culturally dominant online parenting forum to such an extent that managers of other parenting websites feel obligated to reference Mumsnet – notably those I spoke to at Dad.info also liberally name-checked Mumsnet. SR's introduction of Mumsnet into the founding story of Netmums also serves the function of justifying Netmums' existence – they offer a service to parents and families that is not provided by the 'different type of environment' of Mumsnet.

That the founding story of Netmums was not told from the perspective of a single protagonist and that it was not possible to sum it up with memorable sound bites may serve to give the story greater authenticity and appeal to the more quotidian aspects of parents' lives. The plural 'we' is used consistently on the website, as it is also by SR. For example, in the following 'small story' regarding Netmums' early 'board meetings' told in response to a question about how design decisions are made. My phrasing should be noted here in its relationship to what JR of Mumsnet had previously told me about all design decisions going through her,

'JW: Do these decisions go through you?

SR: No, no committees or anything, I mean our board meetings were me and S (co-founder) sitting in the car outside the playgroup you know I remember vividly saying "it's a very strange way to have a board meeting but it'll do" (*laugh*) you know because when we sort of realised we had to have formal structures and things we just fit it in and around our kids and we weren't paid for the first number of years...'



In this narrative of conducting a business meeting in the car outside playgroup, framed as strange by SR, family-oriented collective identity is privileged over work-oriented individual identity. She and her co-founder are depicted as somewhat naïve in not realising they would need to have formal structures, but also as putting their families first so that when their business started growing they ‘just fit it in around our kids’. It is notable that work is made to fit around family rather than the other way around. This ‘small story’ (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012) functions as evidence of the veracity of the wider narrative of Netmums that motherhood is an all-encompassing identity available to all.

As well as being defined in opposition to Mumsnet, SR emphatically constructed Netmums as fixed to notions of the local and the canonical heteronormative family home. Founded on personal experiences of PND, Netmums started as a series of small local members-only community information websites serving specific places. Several times during the telephone interview SR lamented the fact that ‘the world has changed so much in recent years’, for example web content having to be made available to non-members of Netmums so that Google searches can access it. This pace of change was continually framed as ‘unfortunate’. This is demonstrated in the following quote from when SR was telling me about the approach to design at Netmums,

‘You know it’s become more professional looking – the site has had to be as the technology has gone forward, which is a shame really because it’s lost some of the- that sort of home made feel that was quite helpful to us about who we are but when you get big it becomes difficult to always maintain that.’

SR’s regretful tone reveals nostalgia for a past world, constructing Netmums as a website that complements the local physical world rather than existing as a separable entity. Although her statement ‘*that sort of home made feel that was quite helpful to us about who we are*’ suggests

how sharply aware she is of the Netmums brand and the paradox that the technology moving forward and the website growing in size makes appearing to be authentically local more difficult.

#### **5.4.2: Social Class**

##### ***Middle class parenting practices as normative***

Neither ethnicity nor social class were directly spoken about by SR until I asked her a question about it, 'How much idea do you have about the kinds of parents that the site appeals to in relation to say, age of children, social economic status, ethnicities, that kind of thing...?' to which she answered,

'SR - ... roughly a third of our groups (have) household incomes of less than £25000, um which is different from other sites- for example Mumsnet of course-

JW – -yeah sure yeah absolutely

SR – Different target audiences really-

JW – mm mm- and um-

SR – -and I think the reason for that is because of the local and the support, so- so for example if you're a more middle-class mum, and you've paid to go to NCT classes then you might, you know you'll have a group around you that you'll have met and got to know and so, so a group of supportive friends, this is a characterisation of course, but it's just a suggestion, whereas if you are on a very low income it's actually much harder to- you know you can't afford to go to 'Aquatots' and NCT and all those sorts of things, so it's actually quite difficult to make those contacts.

In the follow-up email interview I sent the question,

'You said previously that 'roughly a third of our groups have

household incomes of less than £25000, which is different from other sites, for example Mumsnet'. You went on to say that Netmums and Mumsnet have 'different target audiences'. Can you tell me more about your target audience?'

to which SR sent the reply,

'Target audiences is probably the wrong term! We see ourselves as being available to/ speaking to 'everymum' – the broad spectrum. Being a parent is a great leveller and it doesn't matter where you are from your issues are the same. We also recognise though that those who are more in need are likely to be those on lower incomes and they are probably more in need of local information and support - which accounts for our audience being more skewed towards those on lower incomes. EG it's been suggested that our meet-a-mum boards are more used by mothers in more deprived areas because they've not have (sic) opportunities through NCT and other paid activities to meet people.'

It is noteworthy in the first quote above, from the telephone interview, that Mumsnet is again the difference from which SR claims Netmums' identity. That in her response to my email SR corrects what she said in the first interview regarding 'target audiences' is notable as it provides evidence of the Netmums brand identity that they aim to be 'for every mum'. Despite this clarification in the email interview, she goes on to reiterate a narrative that she termed 'just a characterisation' in the telephone interview, about those on lower incomes having fewer opportunities to meet people through paid activities such as NCT. The repetition of this 'characterisation' is noteworthy as it emphasizes that the Netmums model of social support is constructed according to a normative ideal of middle-class notions of sociality and 'good parenting' as the most

desirable for all. Given this, it is not surprising that the founding story, told by SR, positions Netmums as an organization as seeking to fit in with the established order of things rather than challenging canonical narratives of parenting and social support. Her description of Netmums as 'our little parents website' when telling me about how the website was funded in the early days is indicative of this,

'We approached Tesco actually and said to them um you know "we think that this is something that would be really valuable for um for, for parents" and you know "would they like to see this happen?" We were aware that they had their baby and toddler club and thought it could fit very well with what they were doing with that. So they invested in us to help get the first 40 sites, so they gave 3 years funding to that. Um and then we recruited volunteers to do that across the country for us and um they unfortunately also invested in iVillage at the same time um and something around £35 million or something ridiculous and then a year later it sort of went wrong and they ended up um er selling it for £1 (laughs) a couple of years later so at that point they didn't have any appetite to further invest in our little parents website which was a real shame, so that stopped but that was fine, we then er continued on a wing and a prayer for a while and then continued to get sponsorship from people – a bit from BT, we won an award, we then got money - a little bit from Huggies, a bit from Nick Jnr so we got sponsorship from 2 or 3, continued to build the site across the country'

SR positions Netmums as dependent on big-name brands, such as Tesco for start up, 'Would they like to see this happen?' While Netmums *are* characterised by SR here as 'valuable', they are also positioned as not in control of their own fate, 'we then er continued on a wing and a prayer'. Fate and chance play a key role in SR's plotting of the founding story of Netmums. The above excerpt is another example of the recurrent use of

the word 'unfortunate'. The repeated casting of both the managers as characters and key events in their founding story as 'unfortunate' serve as emblems for their potential usership. Whereas the story grounding Mumsnet is of heroic achievement and on-tap expertise, Netmums' story is about deficit to be made up.

#### **5.4.3: Gender on Netmums**

The framing of events as happening *to* the central protagonists, rather than them being in full control of them, recurred several times through the interview. For example, when during the telephone interview I asked, 'I just wondered if you could tell me how it came to be called Netmums?' SR replied,

'Simply by- poor S (*laughing*). She was looking for names like 'women on the web' but realised that there was a pornographic site so it wasn't- all the sites around sort of women and things were you know tend- you know many of them were a bit dodgy. Many were taken by that stage, many names, so it was simply the fact that that was the one that she came across that hadn't been taken-um unfortunately she didn't check the alternative Mumsnet had or hadn't been taken- anyway so that's where we ended up – so just by chance. And the reason and it was and we do get questions sometimes about why we don't include fathers. I mean Netmums was just because we were mums and we were talking about mums and trying to support the people who we knew were on maternity leave and struggling and so on and so forth so um so um um and that's the name that we could find so and then in fact after a couple of years we did start to think, "oh perhaps we could try and be more inclusive" so we changed to a new platform or something so I had a go at rewriting a lot of our articles but in fact we couldn't – when you put the word parents in it didn't seem to

work. We are speaking to a specific audience. We've had about eight dads over the years complain to us and we've suggested that they help us write more for dads but none of them have ever done that so (*laughing*).'

This excerpt further indicates an acceptance of the canonical, this time in relation to gender. SR again frames the protagonist, this time her co-founder, as unfortunate. In framing her actions as naïve this narrative suggests that domain names of women on the web generally link to pornography, whilst also positioning Netmums as part of a counter-narrative of women on the Internet offering support around motherhood. The key role of chance and fate is again notable, the act of searching for suitable brand names imbued with a sense that their fate was not in their hands as many had already been taken. Notably, Mumsnet are again mentioned by name here which positions Netmums among 'the many', part of the existing status quo, while marking out Mumsnet as a different brand.

SR also draws in her and her co-founders' personal experiences of being 'mums' and wanting to support those they knew on maternity leave who were also struggling, thus their personal narratives accord with a canonical narrative of 'parenting' as really denoting 'mothering'. Despite this, SR describes how they made an attempt to be more 'inclusive' of fathers but that 'it didn't seem to work' because 'we are speaking to a specific audience'. The small story she tells about 'the eight fathers' who complained but then failed to take up Netmums' offer to write more for dads serves as a justificatory narrative for the name of the website and their focus on mothers as the primary parent in need of support, in the process buttressing a canonical narrative of parenting as mothers' work.

#### **5.4.4: Support and moderation on Netmums**

During the early part of the telephone interview, SR moved seamlessly from framing users of Netmums' forum as free agents who

‘wanted to express their views but would talk in a supportive way’ to the subject of moderation of the forums,

‘So what we decided to do was to have a forum but we firstly took control and moderated it very hard, so anything that we felt was um um was um judgmental or difficult we would we would um not accept, we took it out, um so we would be deleting posts and so on um we um wouldn't allow bullying um or you know or or any of those sorts of things, so-so we were very clear you know, so we did have circumstances where we felt that there was a gang of about 10 people that were particularly difficult and would make comments on lots of peoples' posts that weren't very pleasant so we decided that we didn't want them within the forum so we we um we banned them and um so so we took a clear stance in terms of moderation from the start – we wouldn't allow swearing and so on, put filters in to make sure that didn't happen. Um on the basis that although it didn't suit everybody because some people felt ‘well I don't want to be here ‘cause I can't say what I think’ – so we knew it restricted our audience but we wanted it to be a supportive environment so, we couldn't see how you could have a debate around abortion where there are lots of very passionate views and then also be able to support somebody saying ‘I've found I'm pregnant I think I'm gonna have an abortion, I need to know how to, I need to know how to- you know- need to talk this through’ – and we couldn't see how we could do both, so um- so that's why we took that view.’

Labelling the people who were banned for posting unpleasant comments with the (arguably class-linked) word ‘gang’ in the small story SR tells here serves to justify Netmums' subsequent approach to moderation, which is openly described as controlling. Citing abortion as an example, SR expresses Netmums' position that such a subject where

passionate views are held cannot be simultaneously freely debated and support offered for those considering it, or who have experienced it. This sets up a binary, implying an inherent incompatibility between those who want to speak their minds and, as in her previous example, be free to swear, and those who are vulnerable and in need of social support.

### ***Parent Supporter service***

While what is and is not said is a central theme throughout this narrative analysis, in this case it is not only important in terms of what is and is not said by SR herself, but also the ways in which Netmums permit and do not permit users to express themselves on the forum. The Netmums Parent Supporter I interviewed is a qualified social worker - part of her professional role at Netmums is also to help moderate the forums. She told me that she prefers Mumsnet for her own personal use as a mother. Comparing the two websites she wrote,

‘I think Netmums seems to be more 'support driven', people post there looking for support. As such they tend to be in a more vulnerable phase of life. If people are unsupportive, the mods remove those posts ... There is a lack of debate or discussion ... I think the foundation of Mumsnet feels different, it seems a bit more feminist or something. More members seem to be focused on being themselves and carving out a career for themselves while looking after children.’

In the following email I asked,

‘Can you tell me in more detail what you mean by ‘unsupportive’?’

to which she replied,



‘The main topics usually are things like benefits - say someone posts about struggling financially, lots of people can respond saying well you need to get a job, benefit scrounger- i have no sympathy for you etc. Or maybe an unplanned pregnancy - people can be very nasty and seem to think when they say it via a computer screen it doesn't matter what they say- I doubt they would say it like that in person!’

These passages are noteworthy as some Netmums users are characterised as actively unsupportive as regards peer-to-peer communication, while actively supporting malignant and erroneous canonical narratives involving welfare support and unplanned pregnancy. Also of note is the Parent Supporter’s differential positioning of users of Netmums - some framed as unpleasant and lacking in online etiquette - and Mumsnet users who are framed as more self-aware and multi-faceted - being both career-minded and looking after children.

The Parent Supporter also compared self-moderated private Facebook groups she is member of with the more regulated approach taken by Netmums,

‘The groups are private and secret. Only those in the groups can read this information. Therefore you can build up more of a relationship, these can build up over time. However there can be 'witch hunts' and the wants of a strong personality can play out. There can be dramas, people can get picked on. Others get no chance. It isn't fair and regulated ... On forums like netmums people would be banned/ deleted/ comments removed so no online incidents like this can escalate to the same level.’

This extract is consistent with Netmums’ splitting of ‘support’ and ‘chat’ into separate sections as seen in the previous chapter, emphasising a

notion that for an online forum to be supportive requires fairness, so external moderation is essential. Furthermore, in framing 'chat' and, in the above extract, 'relationship' as different to 'support', Netmums can be seen to reproduce an expert-client discourse of social support delivered by professionals to those in need. Indeed, the parent supporter used the term 'service-user' to refer to those she communicates with on Netmums in her professional role.

Notably, both in this interview and those conducted with SR, the Netmums parent support service was framed as unquestionably benevolent. Equally noteworthy is that taking up the position of deciding what is and is not acceptable itself requires passing judgment so there is arguably a clear sense that through hard moderation of their discussion forum Netmums actively police the normative (Donzelot, 1997).

### ***'Continuity of action': Governmentality***

In the telephone interview, in response to a question about the design of the Netmums logo, SR spoke about the importance to Netmums as an organisation of keeping the 'home made' and 'soft' feel of the website. She suggested that people feel that they are members of a local community,

'... So it's about trust, it's not just about loyalty. It's not even about loyalty, it's more about trust I think- um and then that- that trust is important then in terms of support as well. Um so it's- the idea is it's a community that you go to when you want to know what's on at the weekend in your local area and then because you're there you are reading up about baby massage and you think 'oh that might really help' and then you can find out about the local classes and you can kind of trust a class because you can see what other people have said about them and then you see it says here it might help PND – "maybe I've got PND" - so you can then go and

talk to people in the forum and say 'I'm not sure I'm coping very well', and so on, so it's that sort of continuity of action that you get um that's really important to us and the support that we provide.'

Here SR describes the different kinds of support that are important to Netmums as an organisation and how a potential user might journey through the website's different levels. In this narrative, online community, physical locality, family activities and classes, and psychological health are connected in what SR terms 'continuity of action'. According to a 'hermeneutics of restoration' (Josselson, 2004) this notion of 'continuity of action' can be simply understood as helping those positioned as vulnerable, namely mothers – which it surely is. But applying a hermeneutics of demystification provides a more complex picture, as it can also be seen as part of an entrenched psychologised discourse of 'parenting' imposing a particular set of norms through which parents (mothers) are hailed in a process of interpellation (Althusser, 1971). The repetition of the word 'trust', preferred by SR to 'loyalty', which is rejected, emphasises the importance to her that Netmums is seen as a trustworthy brand. During the telephone interview, in response to a question about funding, which she told me was mostly via advertising, SR spoke about Netmums' large government grant that funds only their team of online health visitors and parent supporters,

'SR - If we lost the funding it wouldn't affect the website but we would lose you know some of the support that we are able to offer.

JW – So is that sort of specific people working in specific areas and fields of support?

SR – So yep, we've done a number of things over the years, so we've set up online classes and things but the principal way in which the funding is used is to fund um health visitors, Netmums' parent supporters and experts from organisations like Relate, Women's Aid- um, CAB, there are

about eight now different charities but, so the idea is again that we're the conduit. So we have the community and at local level- if you're struggling and in need we can't provide the support to you specifically but we can tell you somebody who can, so that's why we have our lists of- of um charities and so on and support groups. And then nationally if you want to talk about something obviously you will get the support and understanding from your peers um but so much better if you can also get a bit of a professional view, either a bit of a professional view within that forum because this might be the first time you've opened up about this idea and because you're doing it in a relatively anonymous community environment it's quite safe to hear from a professional, you're not having to go and knock on their door and go to your GP - so you can give them so much more by offering them that but also, especially somebody like Women's Aid, we would say to them, you know before this, 'you're really struggling I can see that you need to talk to Women's Aid' but they wouldn't have the confidence to do it – to pick up the phone is quite a big thing. So now we've got Women's Aid we'd say, 'Oh I'm just going to ask somebody from Women's Aid to give you some advice'. She'd come and give them that advice within the safety of our community. So we've got that, but also it can link out to the relevant bits of their website or- you know- encourage them to because they've facilitated that contact they then feel confident they can do it and so on so they are much more likely to make that leap. So it's about connecting out to these support organisations as well.

JW – and is that done through moderation to a degree? You know like on the forums – so if you can see someone is in particular-

SR – So all of this is done through these people working in our forum yes, yes exactly. So these are people who post

alongside the other mothers within the support part of our forum. It's called the 'parent supporters service'. So you'll see if you look up the 'drop-in clinic' that's the sort of um a place where if you post you're guaranteed to get a response from either a health visitor or a Netmums parent supporter um, if you post in our support boards more generally um then you won't be guaranteed but you may well get a um a sup- um er a supportive post or a conversation with somebody according to what your needs are. So those are read by our parent supporters and then responded to alongside other peers. It's quite a major, major, it's all quite hidden so it's all just amongst all the rest of it, but it's a major, major contribution and we've got evidence to say it's saving the taxpayer money because we get fewer contacts, there's quite a large number of avoidable contacts where people who go to their GP or health visitor when they don't need to.

JW – And does that link with the Government funding? Are there targets around that?

SR – Er that's all so yes there are either targets around avoidable contacts um I think there are expectations about what we need to do in terms of avoidable contacts but our targets are more specifically about the number of people that we support, either through information, through support, through them looking at our content on our website around, for example, depression or-or through- and- or the number of people who are directly supported by a parent supporter.'

Although SR clearly states that the website itself is not funded by the Government, the trained parent support workers are. She described the professional support they are able to offer through the government contract as 'a major, major contribution and we've got evidence to say it's saving the taxpayer money because we get fewer contacts.' It is notable here that she uses the pronoun 'we' and 'the taxpayer' to refer to

avoidable contacts with real world support services, as this attributes one voice to Netmums and the Government, positioning them as powerful as they direct support out to those using their forum whether it is requested or not. This in turn serves to further position Netmums users as less powerful and lacking knowledge of what it is they need and how they should behave as parents. This dynamic is framed as an inherently and unequivocally good thing - indeed, the parent support worker told me that she has received personal messages of thanks from 'service-users'. However, if SR's talk about the major contribution Netmums are making is considered in the context of the heavy moderation of the forums things appear more complex. In the email interview SR wrote, 'we are used to the types of topics that cause problems and moderate carefully and as consistently as we can, but we don't enter into discussions with the members themselves' - it should be noted here that the management of Mumsnet do at times actively enter into discussions with users of their forum. As noted in chapter four, there is a discourse of governmentality visible on Netmums, whereby content can be seen to speak to specific government agendas, such as the 'Big Society' (Cabinet Office, 2010) in Netmums' United Kindmums campaign. SR's description of the support being 'quite hidden' with parent supporters posting 'alongside the other mothers within the support part of our forum', also speaks to this governmentality. As SR wrote when I asked for clarification of the approach to moderation in the follow-up email interview,

'Not all (members) will be aware – it was actually most important that we moderated it from the beginning, so set the tone, and having done so members themselves have expectations of each other, so the work isn't about clamping down whenever someone steps out of line. Although people won't be aware of heavy moderation, they are aware of the way in which people (members) conduct themselves on netmums'.

That the narrative of social support on Netmums is told as precipitated by both managers' personal experiences of coping with PND serves to justify the governing of others through community. Their personal narratives of becoming parents and the support they found helpful unquestionably attests to the need to provide it for others who are positioned as socially marginalised. A key narrative of inclusion is foregrounded. But what SR also seems to be describing in her email is a process of interpellation - according to Butler (1997) this act of recognition then becomes an act of subjective constitution, as she describes the process as a dependence '...on the address of the Other in order to be.' (p.26). Thus, a process of social governmentality, through which governments govern not by governing society but 'through the regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors in the context of their particular commitments to families and communities' (Rose, 1996, p. 328; Rose & Miller, 2008) can be seen to be taking place within the Netmums forum. In their desire to cater for 'every mum' Netmums privilege inclusion over freedom of expression.

### **5.5: Conclusion: Similarities and Differences:**

To conclude I will discuss similarities and differences between Mumsnet and Netmums founders' narratives of 'parenting' and social support, relating them back to the research questions set out at the start of the chapter.

#### ***Organisations fulfilling a need for knowledge, advice and support***

There were broad similarities in the narratives of parenting and social support foregrounded by the respective managers. For example, they both framed the inception of their organisations as fulfilling a particular need or gap in parents' lives – JR and SR reiterating Mumsnet and Netmums respective official aims 'to make parents' lives easier' and 'to help parents enjoy parenting more'. Also, the notion of more

experienced parents handing on knowledge to newer, less knowledgeable parents was emphasised by both managers, albeit while appealing to particular constituencies of parents through different means – Netmums tapping into ‘real world’ local communities and Mumsnet focusing more exclusively on online communities of anonymous individuals. SR emphasised the importance of ‘the local’ to parents in relation to face-to-face child-related activity groups and social support through meeting-up offline via Netmums. Describing the website as ‘the conduit’, key narratives of ‘parenting’ and social support were interwoven by SR, both with one another and with conventional ‘real world’ service-driven ‘professional’ models of social support and normative notions of parenting relating to gender and social class.

Indeed, JR and SR both drew on discourses of top-down professional knowledge about parenting. For example, first-time parents were constructed by both as learning subjects, although positioned somewhat differently: SR framing new mothers as lacking ‘knowledge’, while JR talked of parents pooling wisdom and knowledge and talked about not having been ‘trained’ for parenting, positioning Mumsnetters as possessing the knowledge to train one another. A narrative of governmentality ran through SR’s narrative of the service-model of social support offered on the ‘drop-in clinic’ section of their forum. The bestowing of OBEs on the Netmums founders in the New Year honours list 2014 can be seen as reflecting the policy-aligned and target-driven support they offer. In other words, Netmums works *with* the government (at the time of the interview) to a remit that positions and targets social support to particular groups deemed to be vulnerable in particular ways. Conversely, politicians have been seen to court Mumsnet, notably during the 2010 election campaign (arguably leading to the founders being voted 7<sup>th</sup> most powerful women in a BBC Radio 4 Women’s Hour poll in 2013).

The differences in the two websites’ approaches to moderating the forums illuminate the key distinctions between them. While there was some evidence of an embedded expert-client discourse, both JR and the moderator I interviewed at Mumsnet foregrounded a peer-to-peer model of



support, framing Mumsnetters as free agents. Conversely, SR foregrounded top-down moderation as a key aspect of their forum, and the need to 'set the tone' through 'hard' moderation to ensure the forum is 'supportive'. In this sense, both SR and the parent supporter described a process of interpellation whereby Netmums moderators police normative ideals of 'parenting' and the Netmums social support service.

### ***Links between personal and canonical narratives***

Both managers framed their personal experiences of mothering as emblematic of parents' experiences in general, thus linking personal and canonical narratives of parenting. Through the tragi-comic story of Mumsnet's conception – retold by JR with her as the unequivocal protagonist – a narrative of aspiration was constructed for parents to tap into. JR's story of individual ingenuity in creating a business opportunity out of a negative parenting experience, and the continuing development of the Mumsnet narrative imbues it with a contemporary rhetorical power. Furthermore, JR's ongoing managerial position and the Mumsnet brand's wider social power and political influence may serve as an emblem for parents of the possibility of continuing to develop identities other than those relating to parenting or mothering.

At one level, SR's openness about her and her co-founder's experiences with PND served to normalise a cultural narrative of depression relating to motherhood, and symbolises a welcome destigmatisation of mental illness. At another level, the interweaving of SR and her co-founders' personal narrative of illness and subsequent need for local level support and a canonical narrative of first-time motherhood as inherently isolating imply their narrative is emblematic of normative experiences of motherhood. Similarly, SR's framing of Netmums' key role as providing 'continuity of action' between everyday parental activities, such as attending child and baby-related social groups, and support for PND, suggests a 'continuity of experience' linking mundane everyday parenting practices and experiences of clinical depression that implies interpellation.

### ***Middle class practices as desired and normative***

Middle-class parenting practices, such as attending paid antenatal classes, were framed as both desirable and normative of 'good parenting' by both managers. The government funded support forums on Netmums were framed as emblematic of the experiences of mothers from lower social economic groups rather than of all mothers. SR constructed Netmums' narrative of parenting and social support according to ideals of middle-class sociality and 'good parenting'. Parents and families on lower incomes were characterised as having fewer opportunities to take part in paid activities such as NCT classes in ways that framed such activities as inherently desirable for all parents, regardless of lived experience. While her key narrative that Netmums is a place for 'every mum' ostensibly homogenises mothers, presenting parenting as 'a great leveller', those either unable to afford or access support, or lacking requisite knowledge, were positioned as likely to be more in need of targeted support relating to the making up of deficits. JR also constructed a level playing field, stating 'there is no entrance requirement for Mumsnet'. However, her emphasis on education and knowledge capital (the use of the phrase 'entrance requirement' itself perhaps being indicative) alluded to the potential for people to feel excluded, but drew on the notion of freedom of choice to frame this as unproblematic. The restricted code employed in JR's telling of the Mumsnet founding story – via which shared experiences, values and ideals were assumed – privileged middle class ideals of parenting as normative.

### ***Gender, work and family***

Gender was constructed differently in each of the managers' accounts. SR consistently privileged the word 'mother' over 'parent', as she constructed a canonical family-oriented collective identity for Netmums. This was evident in SR emphasising that she and her co-founder fitted their work developing Netmums around their families, thus

foregrounding their parenting identities. Conversely, in the telephone interview JR used the word 'parent' rather than 'mother' almost exclusively. In the follow-up email interview JR was more explicit, suggesting that *women* were pressured to pretend their families did not exist in order to get on in their careers prior to her deciding to set up Mumsnet, which, as an exception to this canonical narrative, 'tells it like it is'. JR exploits her personal narrative to expose the unfairness of a canonical narrative of gender inequality for mothers in the workplace, enabling her to firmly position Mumsnet as running counter to the canonical. Furthermore, through her entrepreneurial narrative of founding Mumsnet, in which she heroically transformed a 'disaster' into an opportunity, JR stakes a claim to a collective identity for Mumsnet of a woman who is both ambitious and successful in her career and as a mother. In placing this narrative identity so centrally, JR further challenges a canonical narrative that success as a mother and in one's career are incompatible. SR's narrative of Netmums claimed a greater acceptance of a canonical narrative of the all-encompassing nature of motherhood, as well as her framing of mothers as particularly vulnerable and lacking knowledge as new parents. While JR positioned Mumsnet as a brand leader, SR positioned Netmums, and by extension mothers, as accepting and being more than willing to 'fit in' with existing societal hierarchies.

As with the visual construction of the websites' homepages, racialised discourses and discussion of sexuality did not form part of the stories that the founders told me about Mumsnet and Netmums. This absence again signals the taken-for-grantedness of whiteness and heteronormativity of these popular websites.

### ***Narrative positioning of website brands***

Although JR and SR both framed their personal narratives as emblematic of parents in general, the narrative strategies they employed to do so were very different.

Using 'we' throughout, and referring to Mumsnet users as 'our users', JR imbued Mumsnet with a strong community identity but in tight conjunction with her own singular voice. When JR did use 'I' it lent an authoritative quality to her narrative which, coupled with her aligning of Mumsnet with leading internet brands such as Amazon and Google, buttressed the narrative that Mumsnet is a brand leader and dominant in UK online parenting culture. Furthermore, Mumsnet's entrepreneurial founding story positions the website as a beneficiary in a big societal narrative of the spread of the Internet as representing opportunity and modernisation (Davis, 2013).

While SR was seen to align Netmums with big brands, namely Tesco and BT, the emphasis was different in that they were introduced as organisations they had gained funding from, and Netmums were framed as willing to fit into these brands' identities rather than necessarily forging their own. SR framed the continued development of Internet technology since Netmums' inception in 2000 as somewhat unfortunate. In particular, she expressed it was regrettable they had to make localised features accessible to all users whether or not they were members of that local community, intimating that this diluted the brand identity of Netmums that has been built on parents needing local information. It was notable that SR referenced Mumsnet by name several times during both interviews. Firstly, she was keen to differentiate the Netmums' narrative of 'parenting' by relating more to the local offline world, and producing a connected narrative of social support that accorded with a service-model targeting particular social groups. SR's emphatic framing of Mumsnet as 'a different kind of environment' served to warrant the need for an online space offering more instrumental social support for parents not catered for by Mumsnet and so justified Netmum's existence. When talking about the experience of motherhood SR used 'you' repeatedly, which served to distance and homogenise mothers in general and reinforced a canonical narrative that motherhood is a time of inherent struggle and vulnerability for which a particular kind of instrumental knowledge and support may be required.

JR drew on narrative's performative quality in her telephone interview, employing a tragi-comic gallows humour. This was less the case in the email interview in which her responses were more direct and expressed her personal-political motivations for setting up Mumsnet. JR drew on the tragic genre in the founding story of the disastrous holiday in particular, yet in having a double reversal of fortune the narrative did not adhere to classic Aristotelian tragedy but can arguably be seen to confound genre. This defiance of genre affords JR and Mumsnet a degree of power, the plotting of Mumsnet's founding story as beginning with a pioneering act that challenges rather than accepts the status quo emphasising their identity as brand leader. In becoming the most established UK parenting website Mumsnet is arguably central to a key canonical narrative in wider modern parenting culture, albeit a narrative oriented to normative middle-class ideals of particular tastes and practices (Thomson et al., 2011).

It is perhaps notable that JR was previously a journalist - the founding story of Mumsnet was neatly composed, events framed as logically following one after the other as she retold the story in the first person. In short, it has become a very well-worn story. The clarity and cultural dominance of Mumsnet's story was also indicated by the fact that SR employed it as a key device, a foil in both the plot of Netmum's founding story and the desires of the two co-founders as protagonists to create a different kind of online environment. Rather than neatly plotting events according to a clear temporal order as JR did with Mumsnet, SR's narrative of Netmums relied heavily on fate and chance – events happening *to* the two protagonists, who were frequently cast as unfortunate and / or powerless to alter their course. This is in sharp contrast to the narrative of empowerment – ‘operating *By* parents *for* parents’ – foregrounded on Mumsnet.

## **Chapter 6: The practice of using parenting websites and forums**

### **6.1: Introduction:**

Having explored the materiality, or architecture, of the websites themselves in chapter 5 and their founding stories as told by those who set them up and manage them in Chapter 6, the focus now shifts to examine experiential accounts of persons who use them. Individual email and face-to-face interviews were conducted with six women – three Mumsnet users and three who use Netmums. The main research question driving the design of this phase was: How did mothers who were users of Mumsnet and Netmums narrate their experiences of motherhood and their use of the websites?

Drawing on Shove, Pantzar & Watson's (2012) application of theories of practice to everyday life and social change (Chapter 3) this chapter frames the use of online parenting forums as a social practice. I will draw on individual email and face-to-face interviews to explore what constitutes the practice of using online parenting forums, including posting, lurking, reading, social networking; what its material aspects are (mobile devices; computers); whether there are competencies and etiquettes that users of particular forums are expected to possess / acquire (tacitly or explicitly); and the meaning of using parenting forums to the six mothers I interviewed. A key consideration in this analysis was how these mothers were recruited into and became carriers of the practice, and how the practice changed over time. Due to the small size and opportunistic nature of the sample no claims will be made about the wider population of users of these websites and I will not generalise about the practices. The chapter will consider how and why the mothers were recruited or recruited themselves as users of the websites. By conceptualising parenting forum use as a social practice according to Shove et al's approach, the composite materiality, competencies and meanings involved in using these forums will be analysed, suggesting the

conditions under which such practices arise and the purposes of such practices for mothers and their identities.

### ***Research Questions***

How did mothers who were users of Mumsnet and Netmums narrate their experiences of motherhood and their use of the websites?

- What constitutes the practice of using online parenting forums?
  - What are its materials (i.e. computers, mobiles)?
  - What particular competencies are involved in carrying out the practice of using online parenting forums?
  - What meanings does the practice hold for the participants and what meanings do they construct through the practice of using online support forums?
- Are there contradictions in how users of online forums make sense of their practices?
- How were participants recruited into and how did they become carriers of the practice of using online parenting forums?
- How does the practice change and evolve?

Before examining data collected for my study, the next section provides an outline of social practice theory.

### **6.2: Outline of social practice theory**

Following on from the previous two chapters, I wish to further explore dominant discourses and canonical narratives of 'parenting' through addressing the recursive relationship between human (individual)

activity and the social structures that shape it. In this chapter the unit of analysis is the social practice of using online parenting websites.

The predominant assumption both in everyday life and in much social research, 'now so pervasive as to seem natural' (Shove et al., 2012, p.2), is that behaviours and social action and change can be explained with reference to individuals. Conversely, Shove et al. (2012) draw on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, the kernel of which contends that, whilst individuals tend to frame their actions in terms of conscious purpose and intentions, some habitual practices are largely outside the realm of discursive consciousness. Shove et al.'s conceptual framework goes further in theorising the emergence, evolution and disappearance of practices that have been typically understood as habitual, for example the emergence of daily showering (Hand, Shove & Southerton, 2005).

In explicating their framework Shove et al. (2012) draw on a diverse range of theories of practice, the foundation of which are Schatzki's (1996) appropriation of Wittgenstein's locating of human understanding in the flow of praxis, rather than individual minds, and Heidegger's (2005) emphasis, through his key concept of Dasein, that human action is always already in the world. They also draw on the ideas of Pragmatists James and Dewey, namely the notion that rather than being the outcome of intention, experience is better understood as an ongoing process in which habits emerge, and are constantly challenged and change. The common underlying concept amongst these theories is that rather than simply framing practices as points of connection and transmission between human subjects and social structure, social practice itself is the focus of attention. Taylor's (1971) contesting of behaviourism through locating practices as a primary unit of analysis is cited by Shove et al. (2012) as a key influential and more integrative account – in particular his argument that rather than simply existing in the minds of individuals, meanings and norms already exist 'out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relations, of mutual action' (1971, p.27). Shove et al. acknowledge the popular importance of Bourdieu in influencing the



turn to concepts of practice in social science, although they point out that his work did not develop a consistent theory of practice but instead framed practices as a means of approaching his dominant project of the theorization of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, cited in Shove et al., 2012, p. 5). Foucault's work is also cited as resonant in this area, largely being acknowledged as important in theories of practices entering the general vocabulary of social science. MacIntyre's (1985) work is briefly cited, in particular the notion that a practice must involve the realisation of 'goods' or rewards that are immediate and internal to a given activity, performed in terms of standards that are constituent of the definition of a practice. In the context of my study, MacIntyre's concept of 'internal goods' (2013) was helpful in considering what it might mean to be recruited into the activity of using popular online parenting forums, and the extent to which the different uses of particular parenting forums might be usefully defined as practices.

Shove et al. (2012) borrow extensively from the theoretical work of cultural sociologist Reckwitz (2002), in which he distinguishes practice theory from other social and cultural theories - namely cultural mentalism (claiming the social originates in the 'mind' of the individual), textualism (the symbolic order originates unequivocally outside the individual in the form of signs, symbols, discourses, 'texts'), and intersubjectivism (the social is located in interaction between human agents through speech acts). Reckwitz characterizes a practice as 'a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood (...) A practice is social, as it is a 'type' of behaving and understanding that appears at different locales and at different points in time and is carried out by different body/minds.' (2002, p.250). Shove et al. collapse Reckwitz's proposal that practices consist of the interconnection of 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotional and motivational knowledge' (2002, p.249) into a simpler formulation. They pinpoint three elements that they argue make practices when actively combined:

- *Materials* – things, stuff, technologies, tangible physical entities.
- *Competences* – skills, know-how, technique.
- *Meanings* – symbolic meanings, ideas, aspirations.

Other key features of Reckwitz' explication of practice theory that Shove et al. appropriate are that people, rather than being wholly autonomous agents or simply docile conformers to norms, are most usefully framed as *carriers* of practices, and that practices exist as both entities and performances. While practices exist in the world as identifiable combinations of the aforementioned elements of material resources, competencies and meanings, it is only through their enactment in performance that patterns of practices are reproduced and continue to be recognizable as 'entities'. Using empirical examples such as driving, skateboarding and mobile telephony Shove et al. (2012) argue that the emergence, persistence, transformation and disappearance of practices occur when links between the three types of elements are forged, maintained or broken.

It might be argued that parenting falls into what Shove et al. refer to as the 'must-do' category of practices (2012, p.75) – it organizes everyday lives and, whether desired or not, is a seemingly unavoidable commitment, a dominant project (Pred, 1981). Certainly, the wider significance of parenting connects it to a host of other practices, including that of using online parenting forums. However, in the context of my analysis, parenting is better framed as what Shove et al. refer to as a bundle or complex of variously interconnecting practices rather than a singular definable practice. The question of how practices relate to each other and what these mean for social stability and change features heavily in Shove et al.'s work. As the advent of and use of Internet technologies is irrefutably changing the everyday practices of families, exploring the use of popular parenting websites as a newly emergent practice allows for an interrogation of its positioning in a sea of other co-existing and perhaps previously unconnected practices (Shove et al., 2012, p.77). Furthermore,

parenting, and mothering especially, has strong associations with particular normative ideals of good and bad behaviour, the way it is practiced reproducing distinctions between these. By examining the use of specific popular parenting forums my research allows some exploration of how distinct dominant discourses of parenting may or may not be embedded in them – how far the practice of using a *particular* parenting forum links to and reproduces other existing practices.

Rather than the more common assumption that individuals autonomously choose and become committed to what they do, this chapter applies the notion of the *practice* of using parenting websites *recruiting* people. Reframing the question this way enables a consideration of broader patterns of recruitment and defection and what these might mean for the reproduction of practices. As a key feature of this study is popular discourses of parenting and social support, hence the focus on the two popular websites, Mumsnet and Netmums, an important consideration is the reproduction or not of canonical narratives of parenting through practices of online parenting. Connected to this, another consideration involves distinction, that is how far were the practices of using the particular forums framed as distinctly identifiable to tangible and preexisting communities by the women I spoke to. Certainly pre-existing social ties have been shown to be important for the recruitment of people into new practices in studies of communities of practice (Wenger, 2000). Explaining the concept developed by Lave and Wenger (1991, cited in Shove et al., 2012) as a social theory of learning, Ekherth (2006) notes two crucial conditions in the conventionalization of meaning of a community of practice, First, ‘A commitment to shared understanding...’

‘A community of practice engages people in mutual sense-making – about the enterprise they’re engaged in, about their respective forms of participation in the enterprise, about their orientation to other communities of practice and to the world around them more generally. Whether this mutual sense-making is consensual or conflictual, it is based in a commitment to mutual engagement, and to mutual

understanding of that engagement. Participants in a community of practice collaborate in placing themselves as a group with respect to the world around them. This includes the common interpretation of other communities, and of their own practice with respect to those communities, and ultimately with the development of a style – including a linguistic style – that embodies these interpretations.’ (p. 1-2)

The second condition in conventionalizing meaning in a community of practice is ‘Shared experience over time’, which Ekehert explains thus,

‘Time ... allows for greater consistency in this endeavor – for more occasions for the repetition of circumstances, situations, and events. It provides opportunities for joint sense-making, and it deepens participants’ shared knowledge and sense of predictability. This not only allows meaning to be exercised, but it provides the conditions for setting down convention.’ (p. 1-2)

Wenger’s (2000) conclusion that community and practice constitute each other is an important one in relation to popular parenting websites - that is, the way their popularity is dependent on drawing in recruits from established networks who already engage in shared practices. Connected to this, an important question to consider involves commitment to the practice of using a *particular* parenting website – how far were the women I spoke to committed to using a particular parenting forum, Mumsnet or Netmums, or not.

In the next section I draw on my own empirical data, based on 12 interviews with six mothers to suggest how use of online parenting forums may be understood by this version of social practice theory.

### **6.3: Recruitment into the practice of using online parenting forums**

This chapter frames the use of parenting forums as a social practice that is connected to and dependent on a range of other practices, most obviously those involved in parenting and of using the Internet generally. Before dissecting the practice in greater detail through the data I have collected I want to set out how the women I interviewed said they were recruited into the practice of using online parenting websites.

#### **Netmums:**

Helen, 25 years old and a social worker co-habiting with her partner and their one-year-old daughter used the parenting websites Netmums and Bounty and said she was recruited through the opportunity they afforded to get support for sensitive parenting issues in an anonymous way. She told me that accessing these websites was partly accidental as often they appeared first when she searched online. Helen singled out breastfeeding as something which had been very important to her and that she had difficulty with, having suffered with mastitis soon after the birth of her daughter. She described her parents and her in-laws as giving conflicting advice that was unhelpful and that communicating on the forums on Netmums was more supportive as 'I can tell them things and they don't actually know who I am'.

Netmums user Nicola, a part-time science teacher in her mid-30s and married with two daughters aged two years and eleven weeks at the time of interview, was referred to Netmums by a health visitor for sleep. When she first visited Netmums she thought about looking on the internet for other parenting advice,

'...from that I looked on a few sort of threads an that to do with sort of sleep training and what people did for bedtime routines (Joe: yeah yeah) um I also then started to um 'cause it made me think, 'actually there's a whole world of

stuff on the internet, there's probably a load of stuff on here that'd be useful', so then I um looked on Mumsnet as well on um controlled crying an that and was reading (.) about what controlled crying was um what people did to go about it- had a chat with my sister-in-law as well because she's got um two older girls too um so I asked her a little bit about her- her um strategies and from all of that we came up with our own strategy''

During the two interviews we conducted Nicola told me that her experiences of being widowed prior to having children also motivated her to use the Netmums forums to offer support to others. So Nicola sought practical support on Netmums and that led to her recruitment to the practice of online forum use in that she then continued using the website to offer support to others who had shared experiences of bereavement. She was also attracted by the website being linked to her local area and has met other mothers through Netmums' 'Meet-a-Mum' message board.

Emily, 25 and single mother to a five-year-old girl, has used Netmums sporadically, dipping in and out of the practice. She could not recall the first time she looked at the website, but her first and only post on the forum was for face-to-face social networking purposes when she and her daughter moved to another area of the country to rekindle a relationship with an ex-boyfriend. She later told me that she re-discovered the website more recently after the subsequent breakup of this relationship, 'googling single parent support'. Another occasion Emily described using the website was a recent experience she had of terminating a pregnancy and of how helpful it was to read others' experiences of this on Netmums. It is notable that each time Emily connected to Netmums it was directly related to particular significant life experiences – moving home, breaking up, and for medical advice. This use of the website as a conduit and/or additional to real world support and social networking was common to all three of the Netmums users I spoke to.

### **Mumsnet:**

Donna, a full-time manager of a clothes shop in her mid-thirties and married with a four-year-old son told me that she discovered Mumsnet for the first time when she was ‘...just googling questions about motherhood and small babies, and some other websites came up too’. She told me that she continued using Mumsnet because she ‘... just seemed to like the humour on mumsnet’. Donna expressed several times in both interviews that she is ‘really unmaternal’ and that being able to read about others’ experiences on parenting websites (namely Mumsnet and an American website a friend had told her about, ‘Berkley Parents Network’) helped her feel reassured and to build her confidence when she first had a baby. She told me that parenting forums have made her feel less isolated when she was at home on her own with her newborn son.

At the time of the face-to-face interview, Mumsnet user Louise told me that a friend of hers was about to have a baby and that this friend was finding the Mumsnet pregnancy message boards too fierce and realistic. Louise contrasted this with her own experiences of when she was pregnant and discovered Mumsnet, telling me that she had thought ‘thank God I’ve found people like me’. 37 years old and a full-time student and single mother to her two and a half year old son, at interview, Louise told me she started using Mumsnet when she got pregnant, posting on the ‘relationships’ board about the situation she was in regarding the father of her baby not wanting to be involved in the pregnancy and birth. She said that the advice she received was very matter-of-fact and that, although it was not easy to take on board whilst she was pregnant and confused about the impending birth, it was useful advice. She said that having been through the experience of becoming a single mother she now tries to reply to posts from mothers-to-be on the forum to share her experiences with others. Louise told me that parenting forums were especially important for single parents like herself because they offer a sense of community, and described the Mumsnet online forum as a place where ‘straight-talking

people' communicated honestly about the trials of motherhood, calling her discovery of it a 'revelation'.

Rachel, 31 and married with an eight-year-old daughter and three year old son, spoke compellingly about how Mumsnet had offered her an escape from the mundanity of life as a stay-at-home mother. Although she had used and been a member of several other online parenting forums, including Netmums, Bounty and Baby Centre, she told me she prefers Mumsnet and has been on it everyday since she first heard about it on the Bounty forum during her first pregnancy. Rachel told me that on the Bounty forum 'all the clever, outspoken and likeminded members talked about 'the other place', which was Mumsnet'. Like Louise, Rachel described her discovery that there were others on the Mumsnet forum who felt the way she did as a 'revelation'.

It was notable that each one of the Mumsnet users I spoke to displayed ambivalence about being a mother. They were each, at least in part, recruited by the practice of using Mumsnet affording them a space to perform non-maternal identities and reproduce community-specific discursive practices. This was evident in each of their reluctance to admit to have wanted children, as well as their eschewing of real life communities of parents (mothers), preferring to position themselves as different to and not fitting in with their notion of everyday canonical parenting (maternal) culture. They were also all keen to point out that Mumsnet is not just a website about parenting – entertainment, fitness advice, schadenfreude being examples of other ways they use it.

#### **6.4: What constitutes the practice of using online parenting forums?**

Within the overarching practice of using online parenting forums, among those interviewed there were, broadly, four discrete sub-practices, more or less integrated:



1. Use via search engine for informational support regarding parenting, health and products
2. Lurking, but not posting, on the message boards
3. Posting and actively sharing on the message boards
4. Social networking – use of forums both for regular contact with particular others and using the forums as a means to real-life offline socialising / parenting support groups etc.

Below, these practices are briefly set out with examples of how the women I interviewed carried them out:

#### **6.4.1: *Use via a search engine such as Google:***

Helen told me that her tendency was to search for parenting advice via Google and that usually happened to lead her to Netmums.

Mumsnet user Louise and Netmums user Emily, both spoke of using Google to search for health information in particular, Louise referring to it as ‘Doctor Google’, saying, ‘Ah! What’s wrong with my son, let’s put it in Google, oh no, everything’s really bad! (*laughs*)’.

Emily said that she would always go to the facts first, for both women’s and children’s health questions, using the NHS website as an example, while also talking about her use of the Internet in general as at times obsessional – particularly relating to health queries (I’m terrible for googling things’).

#### **6.4.2: *Lurking but not actively posting on the forums:***

Lurking denotes engaging with forum threads through reading them but not posting any comments or responses (Nonnecke & Preece 2001).

All my participants had done this to a greater or lesser extent. While I did not ask any questions of participants specifically about lurking, comments from interviewees relating to this practice include,

'I don't really ask a lot of questions- it's already been asked millions of times before so you just can search it and see what other people have said' (*Mumsnet user Louise*)

'I don't know why I've never felt the need to [*post on the forum*] – everything I would ever want to ask has already been asked I think' (*Netmums user Emily*)

'I just sort of think well actually the advice I would maybe give has already kind of been given.' (*Mumsnet user Donna*)

'I didn't share my experiences on there I don't think but I did use the experiences of other people to work out what I wanted to do with him to stop him –identify negative behaviour and put a stop to it' (*Mumsnet user Rachel*)

The practice of lurking is especially resonant with notions of self-monitoring or monitoring through others' performances. Shove et al. (2012, p.100) argue that '...self-monitoring or monitoring by others is part of, and not somehow outside, the enactment of a practice'. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Urry (2007) and Ling and Yttri (2002) they argue that the increasing potential for 'micro-co-ordination' offered by smart mobile technologies fosters the monitoring of one's own performance of practices in relation to how others perform. Furthermore, I would argue that the increasing multiplicity of social media platforms to record and receive feedback on everyday practices provides people with access to a constant stream of monitoring of self and of others' performances that provides a gaze about 'what it means to do well or to do a practice at all' (Shove et al., 2012, p.100). It is arguable that parenting practices are

themselves reshaped when carried out in conjunction with social media use – dubbed ‘sharenting’ in some quarters (Meakin, 2013).

Donna, Mumsnet user, and Emily, Netmums user told me that they found lurking on the forums and reading the experiences others posted on there entertaining and supportive respectively. While she said that she felt she shouldn’t really do it ‘as it’s other peoples’ lives’, Donna likened her watching of others’ lives on Mumsnet to a soap opera, and Emily described lurking on the Netmums forum and witnessing the support people offer each other as ‘the opposite to a newspaper’ in restoring her faith in humankind. Emily has posted on the Netmums forum only once but told me that she browses it for between 30 minutes and an hour a day, describing her habitual use of it as an addiction in both interviews.

It is worth noting that the online support engaged in by the women I interviewed was often not reciprocal, there being an apparent distinction between sharing one’s own experiences and engaging in a more vicarious form of support - Mumsnet user Louise called this ‘seeking the experience of others’ through lurking on the forums.

#### **6.4.3: *Posting messages on the forums:***

Mumsnet user Donna and Netmums user Emily told me that they had rarely posted on the forums. Donna was put off when some sleep advice she posted on the Mumsnet forum was questioned and criticised and Emily having posted only once to seek face-to-face meet-ups when she moved to a new area of the country.

Among those who posted on the forums more frequently, there were broadly two forms of posting: For emotional support - fundamental to which was anonymity and no expectation of reciprocity which made it somewhat akin to therapy, and informational support relating to parenting issues such as breastfeeding and routines. The manner of posting by those participants who did so regularly – Nicola and Helen on Netmums

and Rachel and Louise on Mumsnet – was tailored to the purpose they understood the web forums served for them and how they positioned themselves in relation to them.

Using Netmums primarily as a place to get practical childcare advice, Nicola qualified her forum use as being limited to seeking effective parenting techniques for specific things such as potty training. While she told me that by posting she tried to give emotional support to others relating to her personal experiences of miscarriage and bereavement, she said that receiving this kind of support from others online lacked the necessary intonation and was too faceless.

Mumsnet users Rachel and Louise were, at the time of interview, regular posters. They both told me how much they valued the anonymity afforded by Mumsnet as it enabled them to post about taboo topics they felt unable to discuss face-to-face – in particular relating to post-natal depression. Liking it to a form of therapy, Netmums user Helen also said that it was the anonymity of web forums that made them more supportive as she would go there and post for advice rather than asking her family about sensitive parenting issues that they held conflicting opinions on. When I asked Helen whether she had met anybody from the forum she told me she had not as

‘...obviously they’re not my friends, they’re just people (.)  
(Joe: yeah) I occasionally will talk to about problems so (Joe:  
ok) yeah so I definitely wouldn’t want to meet with them I  
don’t think’.

#### **6.4.4: *Social networking: from online to face-to-face:***

Netmums users Nicola and Emily and Mumsnet user Rachel all told me that they had met face-to-face with other parents with whom they had first connected online. Nicola and Emily did so through the Meet-a-mum message board of Netmums. For Emily this was how she was initially

recruited into using Netmums; she told me about how important this had been when she moved to a new area of the UK and that she had found one 'really good friend' there. Nicola also foregrounded the local as having first attracted her to Netmums, telling me she had also met one friend through the meet-a-mum board and welcomes the mutual support they can offer one another. Rachel described her experiences of social networking from online to face-to-face as less successful, telling me that 'there is very little real world support' and was unable to give me an example of offline support when I asked. When I asked if she had met up with anyone from an online parenting forum she wrote back,

'Yes. (...) Generally we met up once and not again, we just never bothered to make another date to meet, not because of any clash in personalities but because we didn't click. One lady I did meet up with for a year, but I was very vulnerable and lonely at the time and she took advantage of me in lots of ways e.g. getting me to mind her daughter when I was 41 weeks pregnant. She was very forceful and dominant and it took me a while to be able to stand up for myself. I met her through the Meet-a-Mum board on netmums.'

While she described Mumsnet as having been a lifeline in times of need, enthusing in particular about the relative lack of obligation/expectation to reciprocate support, Rachel also told me that having Mumsnet had been unhelpful as it led her to 'try less with people in the real world, I am less tolerant with friendships and drop people who annoy me faster.' All three interviews with Mumsnet users were inflected with a particular self-deprecating and sarcastic brand of humour that chimed with manager JR's description of the intelligent 'wit' of Mumsnet (Chapter 6). Louise and Donna both also framed real world socializing with other parents as a predominantly negative experience that they had failed in and to be avoided - Louise telling me about how she was rejected by her NCT group for being different and Donna saying,

‘...to sort of go and have to do it to people where the only thing you’ve got in common is the fact that you’ve had a baby (Joe: mm) I mean just stick pins in my eyes (Joe: right) I couldn’t think of anything worse (Joe: right) well I don’t know if I’m gonna have anything in common with them (Joe: mm)’

The two Mumsnet users’ online support practices were incompatible with a normative ideal of ‘effortful socializing’ in the real world with other parents, suggesting that, for these women, Mumsnet reproduces a distinct discursive understanding of parenting.

#### **6.4.5: Materials, competences and meanings**

This section applies Shove et al’s (2012) theory to analyse online parenting forum use in its constituent elements: materials, competences and meanings.

##### ***Materials***

The physical materials involved in the practice of using online parenting forums are the technological hardware – namely computers and mobile phones – used to access the web forums, as well as the particular software versions of given websites and platforms. When asked about the devices they used to access Mumsnet or Netmums four of the six participants told me that the predominant device was their mobile phone: Donna (Mumsnet) using the desktop version of Mumsnet on her iPhone, usually whilst in bed in the evenings; Emily (Netmums) accessing the forum on her mobile phone which made her three favoured topics most readily viewable; Louise (Mumsnet) usually accessing the forum via the Mumsnet app on her smart phone which allows her to use it both at home and whilst out; and Nicola (Netmums) using her smart phone which she told me saves the time of booting up a computer and is ‘just so useful when you’ve got a baby feeding on you’. Rachel (Mumsnet) described

accessing the website across a range of devices – Laptop, iPad, app on her smart phone - depending on her location and the time of day, telling me ‘I was on it whilst watching DD’s (Darling Daughter’s) sportsday [sic]’. As Helen (Netmums) did not complete her email interview where this question was asked I do not have any data for her on this topic.

The lack of data on the material element of using parenting forums is in part a result of using interviews rather than observation as the main method in this study. In addition, I asked about ways in which they used online parenting websites rather than getting into discussions regarding the history of the equipment they used. There is a limit in interviews to what can be ‘told’ about technological hardware. However, reference was made indirectly to developments in technology that provided for online forum use, as in the case of Nicola,

Email interview:

‘Joe: Please tell me about the ways in which you access the Internet generally and Netmums in particular?’

Nicola: Most of the time on my iPhone as this is easiest when feeding my youngest or supervising my eldest. Occasionally on PC but this would be more for updating profile details rather than chatting etc on forums’.

As well as connecting practices together, another way in which material devices shape the practice is that they can frame what is most readily viewable, prioritizing particular topics based on how the practice has been performed on previous occasions,

Emily (face-to-face interview):

‘I tend to look at more on the computer ‘cause of how it’s set out – ‘cause on your phone you have to go down- I use my phone more but on phone it is just them three really ‘cause I

know where they are [Netmums topics: 'the serious stuff'; 'having a bad day'; 'women's health'].'

While of course mobile Internet technologies have huge potential to distract from everyday real world social activities (Turkle, 2012), they also enable both the linking and temporal synchronization of practices. To use Shove et al.'s (2012) terms these technologies can seemingly have a co-ordinative role when it comes to parenting practices. However, concentrating on the technology alone is not sufficient to further explore the (hyper)connective role played by the increasing availability of mobile technologies in everyday parenting practices. Deciphering how the use of parenting forums encourages particular complexes of practices requires an examination of the other elements of the practice of parenting forum use.

### ***Competences and meanings***

The most obvious competence necessary for use of online parenting forums is basic IT proficiency and working knowledge of the Internet as well as access to the material technologies involved in carrying it out. Even more foundational perhaps, though arguably relating to materiality as much as to competence, is the simple fact of being a parent. It was notable that both Mumsnet manager JR and all three Mumsnet users I spoke to pointed out that being a parent is not a requirement for using the website. Despite this I would argue that it is a fair assumption that the decision to use a website nominally aimed at mothers denotes at least an interest in parenting. In any case, as my study focuses on the construction of parenting practices and identities online, it is parent-users that are of interest to me. It suffices to say that, as any parent will know, actually *being* a parent provides a basic existential knowledge that is qualitatively different from theoretical knowledge. As I pointed out in Chapter 3, being myself a *father*, there is a limit to my own existential knowledge of what it means to be a mother.



As all my participants were already mothers and users of the forums at the time of interview these two foundational 'competences' were taken for granted and so not explicitly talked about. More attention was paid to nuanced forms of 'know-how' relating to online etiquette and how to comport oneself in particular online environments – what is acceptable and what is possible. In examining interview data relating to the more subtle competences involved in online parenting forum use it became apparent that these were continually interwoven with the meanings the practice held for participants. Due to this dynamic relationship between the competences and meanings of the practice, these two elements will be discussed here in tandem. As Shove et al. write,

'Configurations that work (i.e. practices) do so because material elements and those of meaning and competence are linked together, and transformed, *through* the process of doing'. (2012, p.41)

### ***Knowing how to communicate on online forums***

Internet forums all have basic rules, or 'netiquette', that users are expected to become proficient in and to observe (Page, 2012). Many of these are based around the same etiquette that one would expect from real world interactions, such as refraining from personal attacks on other users. But there are obvious key differences between online and face-to-face communication, most importantly that it is asynchronous. Not being in the same place as those one is communicating with enables practices such as 'trolling', namely taking advantage of the relative anonymity of online forums to post inflammatory and personally abusive messages to other users. Whilst 'identity-play' (Merchant, 2011) has been seen as part and parcel of online communication, the practice of actively trolling is outlawed on both Mumsnet and Netmums; such posters are often rooted out on forums such as Mumsnet that have a particular style of communicating.

As I know from firsthand experience, when initially engaging with online parenting forums it takes some time to become accustomed to this form of communicating. For example, particular acronyms need to be learned, some of which are more ubiquitous, existing across several parenting forums, including Mumsnet and Netmums - for example DC / DD / DS (Darling Children / Darling Daughter / Darling Son), DP (Darling Partner), OP (Original Poster) – while others are more esoteric, for example LTB (Leave The Bastard) and AIBU (Am I Being Unreasonable?) appear on particular areas of the Mumsnet forum.

The 'know-how' involved in using online parenting forums varies depending on the type of engagement. For example, those who report using a given forum primarily for informational support around specific parenting issues may only require basic IT proficiency and a basic 'know-how' of online communication codes. Describing posting a message on the Netmums forum as 'that initial bit where it's faceless' Nicola told me,

I don't feel that I can express how I'm feeling sufficiently by writing ..... I know that some people find that far more helpful but (Joe: mm) yeah it just seems a bit strange, especially when you're writing something down it's, you haven't got the same sort of level of communication with I guess sort of how you're saying things an it jus- I would worry that it just doesn't come across right if that makes sense (Joe: right) I think it's much easier to chat (Joe: mm) on the phone rather than just typing if that makes sense.'

Nicola experienced communication on the Netmums forum about private and difficult feelings as less helpful compared with synchronous modalities – such as speaking on the telephone, which she told me she finds more emotionally supportive 'rather than just typing'.

Similarly, Emily, who rarely posted on the Netmums forum, being primarily a 'lurker', told me,

'I know a lot of people like on Netmums and other forums and things (Joe: mm) get that emotional sup- off each other but I would never (Joe: yeah you sai- yeah) get that kind of support- (Joe: -Because- I mean why- wha-what = would you say?-) = I don't know really I mean (sigh) yknow – i-it's two seconds on the phone to my mum (Joe: OK) just to reassure me (Joe: yeah) I mean (Joe: right) i-I like I say I do tend to Google a lot of stuff and over-read into things anyway and then I panic myself about things'

Emily and Nicola both point out they are aware that some people find communicating publically online about 'something that is emotional' more helpful than talking face-to-face to people. However, they find the practice 'strange' so that the prospect of doing so fills them with worry and panic. They both favour the telephone as a more appropriate means of getting emotional support and firmly position themselves as not the type of people who open-up on public forums. The preference for more synchronous forms of communication involving stronger social and familial ties when it comes to emotional support echoes Netmums' manager SR's framing of the pace of change online as unfortunate and her construction of their website as complementing the physical local world rather than as a pioneering communicative tool (Chapter 5). Viewed from the perspective of online parenting practice it is Mumsnet that is positioned as the pioneer in terms of offering an alternative to face-to-face communication.

As seen in the previous chapter, Mumsnet as a website prides itself on 'letting the conversation flow', for example allowing swearing which Netmums has banned. Introducing the comparison without being prompted to in their interviews, Mumsnet users Rachel and Louise drew sharp distinctions between Mumsnet and Netmums. Both framed Mumsnet as an 'adult' forum where users are encouraged to debate issues and question assumptions, while Netmums had been experienced by them as infantilising by banning swearing and sometimes barring users for questioning the status quo. Rachel told me of her experience of being

banned by Netmums for questioning their endorsement of Nestlé. Louise told me that Mumsnet posters refer to Netmums as 'Nethuns due to the over-niceness there'. There is however some contradiction between this notion of free-flowing communication and Mumsnet users' descriptions of some of their experiences of posting on the forum, which suggest that knowledge of particular codes is required for successful communication on the Mumsnet forum.

All three Mumsnet users I spoke to suggested that successfully engaging with the forum involved competence in knowing when to post and how much to say, as well as the development of particular rhetorical skills, such as being able to argue without taking criticism personally. Interviews carried out with Mumsnet user Rachel illustrated that posting on the forum involved developing a level of discernment about how what one chooses to write about may be interpreted. In the email and face-to-face interviews, she presented her Mumsnet use as having a clear narrative trajectory – from initially lacking the confidence and know-how to actively post towards a growing understanding that she could get support online without the social ties that would be expected in the real world. To use Shove et al.'s (2012) terms Rachel evolved from being a novice practitioner to becoming a committed carrier of the practice of using the Mumsnet forum. This demonstrates the linkages between changes in competence and meaning simultaneously. When asked over email whether online parenting forums had been unhelpful to her in any ways, she wrote back,

'Yes. It's so easy to find 'like minds' on the forum that it makes me try less with people in the real world, I am less tolerant with friendships and drop people who annoy me faster. So I am lacking a solid support network offline. Also ... it has opened my eyes to all the things that I do (and have previously never thought about) that people could judge me on e.g. having a toilet brush, letting my DD wear 'boys clothes', not wearing makeup etc. This has made me paranoid and last year fed my anxiety disorder/depression to

such a point that I had a breakdown. I'm much better now at working out what to ignore and what to take seriously.'

When we met face-to-face this theme was picked up again, Rachel telling me about how she had found face-to-face baby and toddler groups to be unsupportive during her experiences of postnatal depression after the birth of her son and her use of Mumsnet at this time,

'Joe: I mean the period you talk about whe- tha-that was a difficult time (Rachel: yeah) when you w- you were still going to this group it was difficult an you say now you make snap judgments on people do- (.) was there a space (.) where you could put that if you want- where you could jus- where you could talk about that an- w-like- whether that's online or offline m-(Rachel: No) so were you using Mumsnet at that point?

Rachel: - Yes I was using Mumsnet (Joe: right) I don't think I was posting very much (Joe: right) because I s- my self-esteem was sort of through the floor and I was seeing people posting things that I thought were quite innocuous- an then getting completely roasted and my self-esteem wouldn't- (Joe: right) so I kept a jus- little things that I knew would not push th-the boundaries- I mean toilet brushes for goodness sake (Joe: mmm) I would never have thought that toilet brushes could've been such a (Joe: right) contentious subject on Mumsnet but there's those who have them and those who don't and never shall the twain meet (Joe: ... *laughing*)...'

Setting aside the practices of using (or not using) a toilet brush, letting her daughter wear boys' clothes, and not wearing makeup, what is of greater interest here is the level of competence required in terms of social 'know-how' in successfully posting on the Mumsnet message forum.

What Rachel describes above is her early use of the forum, before she had developed a greater knowledge of all the possibilities open to her concerning ways of communicating on Mumsnet. She describes herself as watching other users being 'roasted' for what to her seemed 'innocuous' posts, before venturing to actively post about 'little things I knew would not push the boundaries'. However, these posts led to Rachel becoming overly aware of '...all the things that I do (and had previously never thought about) that people could judge me on', having a detrimental effect on her mental health which she talked about candidly throughout both interviews. A crucial feature in these two extracts is that Rachel constructs a stark contrast between her having acquired 'the knowledge' about posting on the Mumsnet forum in the present and her comparative naivety and lack of expertise in her first foray into the practice. The phrase, 'I'm much *better now at working out* what to ignore and what to take seriously' suggests the learning or acquiring of a skill and shared understandings over time through, in Rachel's case, quite adverse experiences. That Rachel suffered what she described as a 'breakdown' and yet continued using the Mumsnet forum attests to the way in which the practice became integrated into her life and a growth in commitment to this particular forum. The extract above illustrates the powerful sense of realization felt by Rachel as 'things [she had] previously never thought about' were questioned, implying she felt a need to assimilate values seemingly idiosyncratic to the practice of using the Mumsnet forum. She went on,

I never realised (Joe: right) that there were people who would come into your house (Joe: OK) and say, 'you have a toilet brush' in their head – 'tha- that's not what I would (Joe: right) do, that's disgusting' (...) I never would've thought that people- an that was one of the things that made me worse because I had no idea that people were making all these little judgments about *me*, I thought, 'well everyone has a toilet brush don't they?' (Joe: right) y'know (Joe: mm) 'everyone does this wi-with their kids'(Joe: mm) and then you go on Mumsnet and you think 'well actually they *don't* do

that with their kids and then you end up questioning yourself- are they- have they got it right?’

Rachel constructs an ambivalent position in that the judgments made by others had a negative effect on her but also led her to question herself and her parenting practices. This monitoring of parenting performance through the practice of using parenting forums was framed by Rachel, as it was by all six mothers I interviewed, as also helpful as a form of vicarious support (see section 6.4.2, this chapter). During her early practice the questioning of her taken-for-granted assumptions was framed as preventing her from posting and detrimental to her mental health. However, as her engagement with the practice progressed, Rachel described her use of the Mumsnet forum as taking an upward turn as her understanding of and competence in it grew. Towards the end of the face-to-face interview Rachel told me how she had learnt to use Mumsnet as a therapeutic outlet after she had exhausted the real-world options of talking with both her counsellor and her husband. I asked her how using Mumsnet was different, to which she replied,

‘Because it’s completely anonymous, you don’t have to bump into people in the supermarket and you don’t have- you can just change your name. Um so you can say I’m doing XY and Z and I’m struggling and you’ll get loads of help and then you can just change your name and it doesn’t cling – it doesn’t stick- um and then you can just – be somebody completely different on another thread, under a different name and nobody will – and you don’t have that baggage coming with you anymore /

Joe: OK, ok. (.) and how does that make you feel – like you said, being somebody completely different on a different thread – or different-

Rachel: - It’s completely refreshing (Joe: right) - it’s um, it was a revelation, I didn’t use Mumsnet for that sort of stuff until- until last year and then I realised that I *could* use it for

that and that was sort of 'wow I don't need to talk to anybody face to face about it anymore (Joe: right yeah) this is brilliant, I can now do it online instead.'

This extract, which describes a key shift in the trajectory of Rachel's use of the Mumsnet forum, illustrates again how developments in competence in a practice can lead to changes in its meaning. She talks of her realization that she could get emotional support via the anonymous communication afforded through the Mumsnet forum, framing it as a welcome alternative to having 'to talk to anybody face to face about it'. It is noteworthy that the high value placed on anonymity here contrasts starkly with Nicola and Emily's perspective on the practice of using the Netmums forum. The anonymous nature of the communication feels to them prohibitive to open sharing and emotional support, whereas for Rachel it opens up a world of new possibilities. A change in the meaning the practice takes on for Rachel comes via a change in her style of communication that has been learnt over time as she has become more competent and confident in the practice.

### ***Name changing and anonymity***

A key aspect of Mumsnet etiquette here is the practice of name-changing. As pointed out earlier in the chapter, the relative anonymity of parenting forums encouraged some to post more openly but was felt by others as prohibitive to sharing private feelings. Name changing is a crucial feature in facilitating anonymity. This was expressed by Rachel as 'completely refreshing' and enabled her to 'be somebody completely different on another thread, under a different name ... you don't have that baggage coming with you anymore'. This practice contrasted with the relative lack of anonymity afforded by Netmums. As Mumsnet user Louise told me in the email interview,

'I have signed up to Netmums, and I hated it for several reasons. Firstly, your username is generated by the site, it's



your first name and a number. Fine if you have a very common name, but mine is not common and I wouldn't want other people to piece together any information I posted and work out it was me. Anonymity is very important when you are being honest online

(...)

A great selling point of Mumsnet is its anonymity, no-one knows who you are and if they find out you can 'namechange' and disappear into the background again'.

Name-changing as a practice is an affordance of the material technology – clearly it is not achievable face-to-face – and is also linked to meaning and the value attributed to Mumsnet in particular. As it also involves a degree of competence about how to comport oneself anonymously on a public online forum, it exists at the intersection between the three elements (material, competence, meaning) of the practice of posting on the Mumsnet forum. When asked for more detail about the role of username on Mumsnet Rachel wrote back,

'Its all you have to go on to get a picture of someone. I put a lot of thought into my nicknames and I have a list of saved nicknames to use in the future. At the moment I have one that reflects certain parts of my personality, but there are some really clever ones on Mumsnet that make me smile when I see them. 'Mummy' names and numbers are generally mocked a bit on MN, users are encouraged and helped to choose new ones. I also like the fact that there are seasonal name changes and swearing is allowed e.g. AnyFucker and BupcakesandCunting – users with those sort of names tend to be outspoken and heavy users of the site as they attract a lot of opprobrium as well as praise.'

Here we can see that name changing contributes to making Mumsnet, at least in Rachel and Louise's understanding, a particular type of parenting website. She describes herself as putting a lot of effort into her nicknames, which chimes with the argument highlighted in recent multimodal narrative research into family food blogging that online parenting forums and blogging sites have become a form of mothering work for some (Elliott, O' Connell, & Squire, 2014). Rachel suggests there is a requisite level of competence involved in tapping into the expected and acceptable codes of communication on Mumsnet, '...there are some really clever ones on Mumsnet that make me smile when I see them. 'Mummy' names and numbers are generally mocked a bit on MN, users are encouraged and helped to choose new ones.'

Figure 6.1: Mumsnet discussion forum (no participants included)

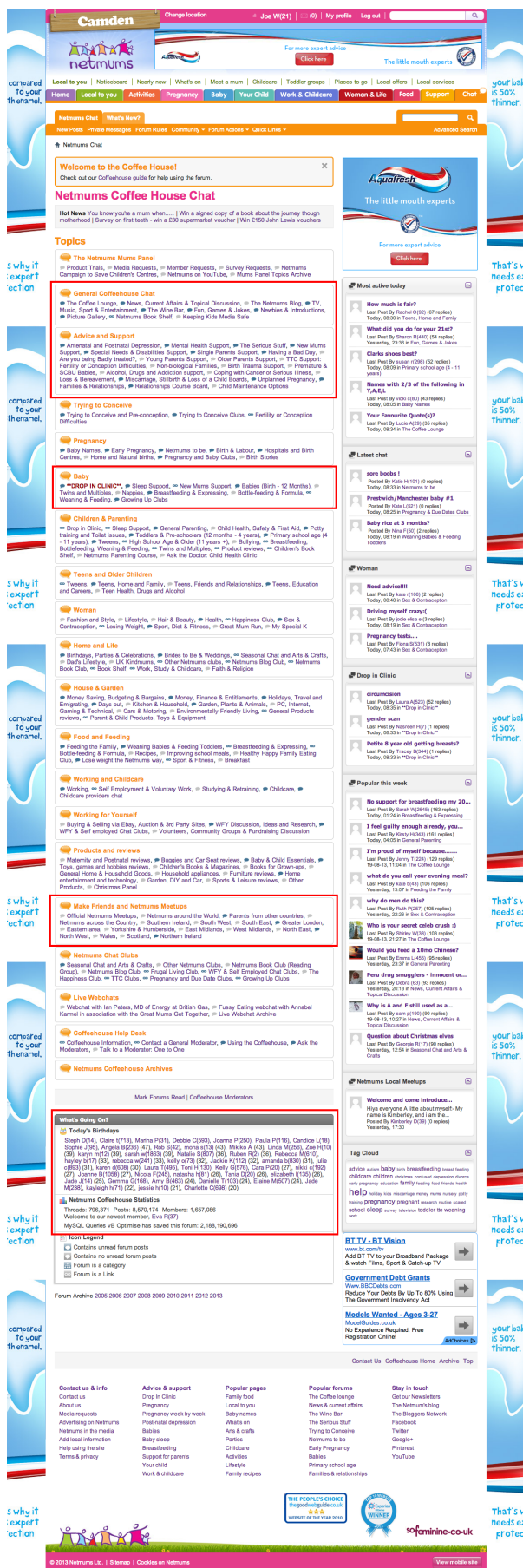


Figure 6.2: Netmums Forum front page (not including participants)

The difference in the two websites' approaches to screen names again reflects the narratives of the websites told by their managers. The automatic provision of real first names aligns Netmums users' online identities with their real world selves and does not encourage the invention of alternative ones. Conversely, the importance placed on the username of Mumsnetters gives high importance to cultural intelligence, wit and individuality, with the acceptance of weaker or anonymous online ties reflecting JR's construction of Mumsnet as an alternative and innovative feminist space where women's identities as people and as mothers can co-exist (Chapter 5; Pedersen & Smithson, 2013). Thus the screen name becomes a mark of distinction on Mumsnet and is part of a stylistic code that requires a certain degree of cultural and intellectual capital to become competent in (Bourdieu, 2010). By automatically generating a screen name for users, the only alternative being to remain anonymous (shown as 'anon') Netmums is not offering their users the same opportunity to construct a distinctive online identity for themselves. And the Netmums users I spoke to did not attribute such definitive meaning to their use of the Netmums forum in terms of their identities – in this sense they seemed to be less identified with any particular communication style, and therefore community.

## **6.5: Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown the relevance of social practice theory to the study of parents' use of online parenting forums, in particular the interconnected elements of practices as constituted by materials, competences (know-how), and meanings. Practices are understood as recruiting individuals, with individuals becoming more or less committed carriers of those practices. Practices are also conceptualized in relation to distinction and communities of practice – how far the practices of using the particular websites Mumsnet or Netmums are distinctly identifiable and different from preexisting social networks. Furthermore, the enactment of social practices involves self-monitoring and the monitoring of others' performances.

This final section summarises what the Mumsnet and Netmums users I spoke to said about their practices of online use and relates this to the research questions set out at the beginning of the chapter.

### ***What constitutes the practice of using online parenting forums?***

Four discrete sub-practices were seen to constitute the practice of using Mumsnet and Netmums. The first concerns using the forums via search engines for informational support regarding parenting, health and products. A second practice was lurking on the message boards. This practice concerned entertainment and support. Lurking was seen to make possible a form of support whereby the experiences shared online by others was used without any obligation to reciprocate. This kind of vicarious support is similar to that dubbed 'surreptitious support' by Johnson (2015) in her recent study of a group of Sydney mothers' online use. Third is the practice of posting and active sharing on the forums. Two broad forms of posting were used among the women who posted regularly - posting for emotional support and posting for informational support around childcare issues. Fourth, the forums were used as a means of real-life offline socializing and accessing parenting support groups, although such experiences may not necessarily prove positive. This practice can complement face-to-face socializing.

### ***How were participants recruited into and how did they become carriers of the practice of using online parenting forums?***

In terms of recruitment into the practice of using the websites, it was unsurprising that all six mothers' started using Mumsnet or Netmums as a way of seeking support for experiences related to motherhood. However, there were differences in the extent to which the individual users can be plausibly described as committed carriers of the practice of using the particular websites.

Each of the three Mumsnet users I spoke to expressed ambivalence about being a mother and seemingly became carriers of the practice of using Mumsnet that afforded them a space to perform non-maternal identities. They each were reluctant to admit to wanting children

and their descriptions of their use of Mumsnet suggested positionings in opposition to canonical maternal cultures. For them Mumsnet was about more than just parenting. Two Mumsnet users repeatedly contrasted the low-level of commitment required in using Mumsnet favourably with what they saw as ‘the baggage’ of face-to-face sociality. Further, they identified exclusively with the one website, positioning themselves as the type of people who ‘get it’, and consequently demonstrated a high level of commitment to Mumsnet.

The Netmums users I spoke to expressed a more matter-of-fact style of using Netmums for particular practical issues: Sleep, breastfeeding support, moving house. Rather than being exclusive carriers of the practice of using a particular website, they framed their use of Netmums as additional to real world support and social networking.

***What are the materials of the practice?***

The particular material technologies used to access the parenting websites were seen to shape the practice. For example, one user described a mobile phone screen limiting what is viewable based on past performances of the practice. Another’s preference for using Netmums on her iPhone as it is easy to do whilst breastfeeding demonstrated technological hardware enabling the coordinating of practices.

***What particular competencies are involved in carrying out the practice of using online parenting forums?***

***What meanings does the practice hold for the participants and what meanings do they construct through the practice of using online support forums?***

These two research questions are combined because the competences involved in online parenting forum use were continually interwoven with the meanings the practice held for participants.

The competences involved in using the Mumsnet and Netmums online forums were seen to vary depending on the type of engagement. Those who reported using a given forum primarily for informational

support (Netmums users) only required basic IT proficiency and know-how of online communication codes. All three Mumsnet users I spoke to suggested that competence in knowing when to post and how much to say, as well as the development of particular rhetorical skills, such as being able to argue without taking criticism personally, was necessary for successfully using the forum. One mother in particular articulated her Mumsnet use as having a clear narrative trajectory – from initially lacking the confidence and know-how to post much, towards an understanding that she could get support online without the social ties expected in face-to-face communication. Another contrasted her present state of having acquired ‘the knowledge’ about posting on the Mumsnet forum and her prior naivety and lack of expertise in her first foray into the practice. Her narrative implied learning or acquiring a skill and sharing understandings developed over time through her experience of having a mental breakdown and attests to the integration of the practice into her life and a growth in her commitment to this particular forum.

### ***Distinction and Anonymity***

The relative anonymity offered to users of Mumsnet in contrast to Netmums was emphasised by two Mumsnetters as drawing them into the practice and enabling greater honesty. This distinctive positioning of Mumsnet use is noteworthy as it suggests that using that particular website involves the reproduction of a complex of discursive practices that sets it apart – at least for these users – both from the practice of using other popular parenting forums, as well as from face-to-face quotidian parenting culture.

The meaning attributed to anonymity was a key difference amongst those I spoke to. Some, especially the aforementioned two Mumsnet users and one Netmums user, framed anonymity as *the* most innovative and supportive aspect of using a parenting forum, and Mumsnet in particular. Anonymity was framed as fundamental to being able to talk honestly online about parenting and, by one of the Mumsnetters, as paradoxically enabling a greater sense of community as ‘people ’in real



life' are very guarded about their personal circumstances' and that 'People (parents) are just generally not that keen on honesty, in my experience - you just find hundreds of mums saying motherhood is the best thing ever and their lives are perfect'. For another two Netmums users the facelessness of online communication was prohibitive to opening up emotionally - they used the website almost exclusively for practical and informational advice, as well as a conduit to meeting other mothers face-to-face in their local communities. In this sense they showed greater commitment to their real world local communities and more traditional forms of sociality around parenting than to their online practices per se, which were a complement rather than an alternative. This way of using Netmums chimes with manager SR's framing of the website as being set up to primarily facilitate mothers to engage with existent local communities (Chapter 5).

The distinction afforded the practice of using Mumsnet echoes that seen in the previous chapter. As highlighted in the previous chapter, by foregrounding peer-to-peer communication JR certainly positioned Mumsnet users as possessing the desire and knowledge resources to 'share and swap and advise each other' about parenting, suggesting that factually accurate and honest peer-to-peer advice were idiosyncratic to Mumsnet. Embedded in this positioning, as well as the founding story of 'the disastrous holiday', are assumptions about pre-existing shared experiences and meanings of parenting to potential users of the website that chime with theories of communities of practice, as does her framing of parenting as a set of learnable skills (Eckert, 2006). Contrastingly, Netmums use was not framed by any of the users I spoke to as symbolic of their belonging to a specific community or as involving the discursive reproduction of any particular set of practices beyond normative notions of everyday parenting culture and as a complement to real world local communities, as per manager SR's narrative.

In summary, the application of Shove et al.'s (2012) theories of practice to the use of parenting forums in this analysis suggests the

practices of using each of the websites differ for these women. The Mumsnet forum involved a defined set of practices – in terms of particular forms of competence and knowledge, as well as shared meanings that may be based in pre-existent practices and identities relating to social class for example. Being more readily definable enables the reproduction of the practice of using Mumsnet and positions it as the pioneering parenting website which has greatest power to shape the future of the practice as well as the individual identities of those who practice it. Contrastingly, less exclusive commitment was shown to the practice of using Netmums, which was framed as complementing other forms of face-to-face social networking and support, rather than an alternative. Among those I spoke to, the greater exclusive commitment shown to the practice of using Mumsnet over that of Netmums implies that more may be at stake for these mothers in terms of their identities in relation to their use of online forums. The next chapter focuses on the construction of parenting identities through exploring mothers' narratives concerning the transition to motherhood and the ways these relate to becoming users of online parenting forums.

## **Chapter 7: The narratives of Mumsnet and Netmums online forum users: Motherhood, turning points and identities**

### **7.1: Introduction:**

This chapter turns to examine these mothers' accounts of online forum use in relation to their experiences of becoming mothers. Turning points in this experience were a recurrent theme in each of the twelve interviews (face-to-face and email) with mothers. Because the transition to motherhood constitutes a major turning point in the life course it was expected that its consequences for women's identities would be foregrounded (Oakley, 2005; Thomson et al., 2011). In particular, the chapter will discuss how these women narrated turning points in their experiences of motherhood, and whether and how these narratives intersected with their talk about using online parenting forums. In relation to this, the chapter will also explore the identities that these women constructed as mothers and the ways in which online parenting forums enabled them to express these identities. Pen portraits of all participants are included in Appendix 8.

### ***Research Questions***

How did mothers who were users of Mumsnet and Netmums narrate their experiences of motherhood and their use of the websites?

- How did these women narrate turning points in their experiences of motherhood?
- How did these narratives intersect with their talk about using online parenting forums?
- What (kinds of) parenting identities did these women construct through their turning point narratives?

- In what ways did online parenting forums enable / support these women to express these parenting identities?
- In what ways did these women draw on canonical narratives (of parenting) in their narratives and parenting identities?

## **7.2: Narrative turning points:**

Narrative “turning points” are moments in the telling of stories when the teller signifies a profound shift in the expected life course and are a useful means for analysing the changing meanings of past events and experiences for the teller, and consequently individuals’ identities (Riessman, 2000; Mishler, 1999). In their work exploring young peoples’ narratives of transition Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis & Sharpe (2002) use the term ‘critical moment’, which they describe as a ‘formal rhetorical device in the unfolding of a story, on which a narrative structure turns’ (p.339). They find the concept useful in enabling comparison across narratives and illuminating how wider social and economic environments frame individual narratives and the cultural resources accessible to people.

In the analysis of these narratives, I draw on Ricoeur’s (1992) theory that identities have a narrative structure that is revealed through a process of emplotment, as detailed in Chapter 3. A particular focal point is the notion that identities are built on a tension between ‘sameness’ and ‘selfhood’.

The women’s accounts were given in response to questions in loosely structured interviews in which they were looking back and retelling their experiences. A range of turning point narratives were identified that related to specific events and circumstances. Some common themes were identified both across and within the cases despite major differences in women’s life circumstances, for instance between lone mothers who

reported that they had become pregnant accidentally and married mothers who said that they had planned the birth of their children.

The transition to motherhood represents a particularly critical moment for self-evaluation when a groundswell of tension may be experienced between the self who was, the new self and the self one might become (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991; Thomson et al., 2011). Motherhood in modern societies is also often accompanied by ambivalence, defined by Parker (1997) as constituting 'a complex and contradictory state of mind...in which loving and hating feelings exist side by side' (p.17). Parker (1995; 1997) argues that it is ubiquitous and experienced in different ways by all mothers, but that ambivalence is rendered as a source of shame and for some women has become culturally acceptable only when cloaked in comical 'confessions' of a kind that I would argue are particularly prevalent on Mumsnet.

The analysis of these mothers' accounts suggests the different ways in which the women relinquish, retain or reclaim control over their past identities, and how these changes are represented in their narratives. In her groundbreaking Transition to Motherhood study, Oakley (1980) applied Van Gennep's (1960) concept of status passage from his study of pre-literate societies, to the transition to motherhood in post-war industrialized Western society. Oakley drew on Glaser and Strauss' (1971) development of the theory in suggesting that the individual passagee experiences the transition to motherhood in varying degrees as desirable, voluntary, controllable and central. In arguing that '...the passage to femininity is the *context* within which the passage to motherhood takes place' (p.187), Oakley drew attention to the competing life course careers, strained identities and ambivalence that may result in becoming a mother as previous self-concepts need to be remodeled and new practices developed to fit new circumstances.

I identified several turning point narratives that reflected women's feelings of control in the experience of becoming a mother and its consequences for their other identities. The following sections discuss the

narratives that were salient across and within cases. In this chapter I foreground four of the six cases – Mumsnet users Rachel and Louise and Netmums users Nicola and Emily. This is because, while turning points relating to motherhood and using parenting websites was a salient theme across all cases, these four cases had a greater amount of narrative data.

### **7.3 Becoming a mother: narratives of loss**

One narrative foregrounded the experience of loss that was linked to the transition to motherhood.

Louise, 37, is a white British single mother with a two-year-old son. At interview she was a full-time student but earlier had worked in the dance music industry. She reported that she became pregnant accidentally. The change in lifestyle that accompanied having a child came as a surprise to Louise. She described her life course careers of work, housing and selfhood as being in conflict with motherhood, which she described as having been ‘foisted upon me’. For instance, Louise described feeling ‘cut off dead’ by people she had been working with for fifteen years. She had to sell her flat and move out of London, deciding to live near her mother who helped her with childcare. Louise was under a psychiatric care team during her pregnancy and said that she probably had postnatal depression also but it was not until a year after her son’s birth that she sought help through counselling. She said this support ‘helped a lot’ but that it took another year until she felt like herself again. When we met face-to-face in a café near her home Louise told me that her counsellor helped her understand that she did not have to ‘wear a mum uniform’ and that her identity as a person/individual could co-exist with being a mother. Louise described the Mumsnet online forum as a place where straight-talking people communicated honestly about the trials of motherhood, calling her discovery of it a ‘revelation’.

Rachel, 31 at interview, is white British and married with two children aged eight and three. She had been a ‘stay-at-home-mum’ since

the birth of her children and was about to begin a full-time PhD when we met face-to-face in her home. Her husband is an academic who spends a third of the year away due to his job, as her own father had when she was growing up. Thus, she expressed an ambivalent attitude towards having children, stating unequivocally that *she* had never wanted to have children – ‘I never saw myself with kids’. Rachel suffered with both antenatal and postnatal depression around the birth of her daughter and described herself as an introvert who enjoys solitude and finds making friends difficult. She dislikes being part of a recognizable motherhood community in the ‘real world’ and feels she has little in common with other mothers where she lives, telling me she experienced little or no support in her local community during her postnatal depression, but describing counselling as helpful. In her management of her intersecting life course careers, Rachel spoke of having to maintain a conscious distinction between her identities as a parent and as a person in order ‘to stay sane’ – affording her personhood greater importance than her identity as a parent. She told me that finding Mumsnet was a ‘revelation’ as it was somewhere where there were other parents (mothers) who felt the way she did.

In both these accounts, experiences of becoming mothers were told as unexpectedly difficult. Motherhood was framed as an undesired event that happened *to* them, Louise telling me that ‘it was kind of foisted upon me’ and Rachel that, ‘it’s not the life I would have chosen’. Clinical diagnosis of depression was a key narrative drawn on by all three Mumsnet users I interviewed. In this chapter the focus will be on Rachel and Louise as the third Mumsnetter I interviewed, Donna, framed the depression she suffered after her son was born as mild and ‘nothing like post-natal-depression’. She told me that she was prescribed antidepressants, but related her depression to being bored at work, telling me she felt significantly better when she got a new area manager ‘who got me doing some different things’. As there was less data from Donna about her transition to motherhood and how it related to her use of Mumsnet, she features less prominently in this chapter. Her narrative is drawn on briefly later in the section on the performance of non-maternal identities.

In both Louise and Rachel's cases it was framed as a critical moment and served to underline the existential loss of self that they saw as consequent on becoming a mother. Their diagnoses of, and treatment for, depression, indicated that the experience of becoming a mother was also framed as one of a loss of agency as they positioned themselves as subject to the vicissitudes of events rather than having freely chosen to have children.

In response to questions about what life was like before / how life had changed since they had children Louise told me in the face-to-face interview,

'... it's unexpected, it turned everything upside down umm (.)  
fff – God, I didn't know who I was (J – right) for a long time  
um (.) yeah serious business (*laughs*) (J - sure right)  
everything is different now (Joe – mmm) everything.'

Rachel said,

'... Becoming a parent really, really was a shock to the system. You know, all of a sudden I couldn't do what I wanted when I wanted, you know – I couldn't eat when I wanted, I couldn't sleep when I wanted, I had to live according to my daughter– (Joe – mmm) So put her in a routine really quickly so I knew what was happening, she slept through very quickly as well – um because I was just determined to have my sleep back.

Joe: Sure (.) that's good news (*laughs*)

Rachel: (*laughs*) yeah, didn't work with my son though (*laughs*)

By describing becoming a parent as 'a shock to the system' and listing previously taken-for-granted physical practices – eating and sleeping – that 'all of a sudden' became less autonomous experiences, Rachel



constructs a vivid narrative of how becoming a mother constrained her bodily agency. Her experience of early motherhood is framed negatively – what she could no longer do as an adult by herself, with the key statement that she had no choice but to live her life according to the routines of her new baby, ‘I had to live according to my daughter’. Rachel describes her determination to claw back some control over events by fitting her daughter into her own routine resulting in the baby sleeping through ‘very quickly’. In response to my declaration that this constituted ‘good news’, Rachel retorts in good humour that her son did not take to her routine, thus thwarting her plans.

Louise also foregrounded bodily changes in her account of becoming a mother, she told me during our face-to-face interview,

‘I thought when I was pregnant that everything would continue as normal and I’d still be able to freelance and work in my PR company and er retain my clients and everything and I did work up until two weeks before he was born and then um I took him to a meeting when he was four months– four weeks old, when I’d just had a caesarian (*laughing*) so I was kind of like- breastfeeding baby in a business meeting, they were like ‘er don’t think so’

Louise positions herself as the tragic naïve protagonist who during pregnancy mistakenly thought that ‘everything would continue as normal’ and that she would be able to carry on working. The ‘and then I took him to a meeting when he was four ... weeks old’ marks the critical moment in her narrative when she recognized that her previous identity was lost. The image of her *breastfeeding* in a *business* meeting is emblematic of what Louise felt, or was made to feel, was a fundamental incompatibility between her identities as a new mother and as a freelance music journalist. It is not only the fact that she has had a baby but that her identity change is a vividly physical one, her transition to motherhood visibly casting her as outside the world of work she had previously

inhabited. The ending of Louise's small story positions her in opposition to her colleagues - 'I was kind of like- breastfeeding baby in a business meeting, they were like "er don't think so"'. This statement firmly places the responsibility for Louise being unable to combine her work and mother identities as her colleagues' – in her framing it was *their* response to her breastfeeding in a business meeting that made the situation untenable. Situating herself within a discourse of being a victim of circumstance, Louise allocates blame to her colleagues, thereby resisting their constructions and enabling the maintenance of an agentic position, albeit one that recognizes her powerlessness in the workplace relative to them.

Whilst Rachel did not draw explicitly on this discourse, in her narrative she gave the power of agentic choice over having children to her husband. When telling me about becoming a mother, she characterized him as broodier than herself and as driving the decision to have a child. After she had laughingly alluded to her son being a more difficult baby to settle than her daughter had been, I went on to ask her if she had always wanted to have children,

Joe: (*laughs*) – did you – erm – want to have children?

Rachel: (*very sure*) No=

Joe: = did you always want t- = right

Rachel: = I didn't want to have kids at all, um and I said – my- I know – Brian (husband) was the one who was looking in pushchairs and going, 'Ooo we could have one of those' and it reached a point where I didn't know what was happening in my life, you know, I got married, I was working in a care home and I thought, 'I don't really want to continue this (.) forever' you know 'this would be a good time to have a kid' and then I can foc-focus on myself afterwards and um- I only had Oscar because I – I knew Brian wanted another one and I said, 'OK we'll try for three months and if I get pregnant brilliant and if not we'll move on' and I just happened to get pregnant in those three months, but it

wasn't through choice, it was more a case of making him happy but I never saw myself with kids (.).'

By framing motherhood as not her decision, Rachel's key narrative of becoming a mother is that it was something that happened *to* her rather than something she actively desired. However, whilst she says that she did not choose it, she portrays herself as retaining agency in deciding that 'now would be a good time to have a kid' as she 'didn't know what was happening in my life'. In this sense having a child is a sought after turning point for Rachel, a motherhood career serving to resolve and decentre her employment career. There is a notable ambivalence in her occupying multiple positions – for example, agreeing to have a second child *for* her husband whilst simultaneously retaining control by setting limits and boundaries around the possibility of conception – 'I said, 'OK we'll try for three months and if I get pregnant brilliant and if not we'll move on''. Her use of the word 'brilliant' here suggests she may not have been as adamant as she purports to have been about not wanting a second child. That she did become pregnant in these three months enables Rachel to retain control as it happened on her terms. It also allows her to continue to occupy this ambivalent stance towards motherhood, sustaining her identity as a person who 'never saw myself with kids' and 'didn't want to have kids at all'. Rachel maintained her position as a woman who 'just happened' to get pregnant, that is by chance, while at the same time retaining her sense of her 'self' as a continuous identity. The emplotment that takes place through what Ricoeur termed 'discordant concordance' (1991) is a useful concept here in suggesting complexity and contradiction. Although Rachel tells a narrative of becoming a mother where fate controls events she crucially retains control over the construction of her narrative. Indeed, positioning selves firmly as subject to the vicissitudes of events and circumstances is arguably a key way that enables Louise and Rachel to maintain identities as individuals rather than being subsumed into a culturally ascribed maternal identity.

### ***Post-natal depression:***

The circumstances in which Rachel and Louise had children were markedly different, but they both told me candidly about their struggles with postnatal depression, telling stories of motherhood that started, at least partly, as narratives of loss. Their clinical diagnoses of depression gave credence to this narrative of loss and, through their talk of recovery and acceptance, transformed it into a narrative of redemption. In the following extract from the fourth exchange in our email interview Louise describes how unprepared she had been for the lifestyle change motherhood precipitated. In answer to a question sent via email asking what her life was like before she had her son, she wrote,

'I was in the music business, so life was one big party. I worked in Ibiza in the summer and London during the winter. I'd been a music journalist and PR ... I had no desire to have children. When I got pregnant ... I went overnight from party girl to mum-to-be. The transition was really hard. Most of my friends were shocked and/or disappeared. I lost my job and had to sell my flat. Having a baby completely changed my life, broke it into pieces really. I found it really hard to accept. It took me most of two years to come to terms with it. I had antenatal depression during my pregnancy and was under the psychiatric team from 32 weeks. I had a C-section at my request as I just couldn't cope with the idea of going through childbirth, which was supported by my mental health midwife, who was amazing. I also probably had really bad postnatal depression, but it was a year before I went for counseling, had three months of that and it helped a lot.'

This narrative is organized around binary oppositions from the outset – 'Ibiza in the summer / London during the Winter', 'party girl / mum-to-be'. These constructions foreclose on the possibility of a positive narrative about the transition to motherhood – an experience construed as

inevitably 'really hard' with seemingly nothing in-between. It should be noted that throughout the interviews Louise foregrounded the importance to her of being honest and truthful about what motherhood really entails. The above extract demonstrates this honesty about her experiences in that Louise does not attempt to present 'a coping front' – a phrase she used later in the interview that implied other mothers are not feeling what they appear to be feeling. Throughout both interviews she repeatedly and firmly positioned herself in opposition to her perception of the normative cultural expectation that 'motherhood is the best thing ever'. In fact, maintaining the binary structure she set up at the start of the extract, Louise openly writes about her experience of '*not coping*' from the time of being pregnant onwards - constructing a narrative of loss in which becoming a mother caused her life to fall apart. Her loss of friends embodies the shock, social isolation and loss of identity she felt as a new mother as they were '... either shocked and/or disappeared'. She also palpably describes her material possessions falling away – 'I lost my job and had to sell my flat', both these momentous losses being construed as resulting directly from the initial critical turning point of becoming a mother. These subsequent ruptures further embed Louise's position of powerlessness as these losses happen *to* her as she loses control of her life. Depression is a key feature in Louise's narrative here, both before the birth when she was put under psychiatric care, and post birth, a time at which she wrote she 'probably had [depression] really bad' but that it was not recognized until a year later when she started counselling. Louise's response to this question concluded,

'However it was only really after two years I felt like myself again. I spent almost two years living in (the South West) (when I had to sell my flat, mum lives in South-West) and I didn't meet a single person on my wavelength the whole time I was there. It was extremely hard and lonely. I'm back in London now and I feel much better. My son is an addition to my life now. We get on well most of the time!'

The recognition of depression and acceptance of motherhood through forging a livable identity as a result of counselling, as well as her return to London, symbolise Louise's redemption. She rediscovers her sense of individuality after the disruption caused by the arrival of her son, an event that, over time, she managed to reconstruct as providing a positive addition to *her* life rather than as the cause of it breaking into pieces. It is notable that she does not give up her identity as an individual here but, presenting her selfhood as continuous, maintains her position as alienated from wider parenting culture, not meeting a single person on her 'wavelength' when she moved away from London after her son was born.

Like Louise, Rachel also positioned herself as alienated from the wider parenting culture, but seemed determined not to give up this identity on anyone's terms but her own. Presenting her selfhood as continuous at all costs, in the email interview I asked,

'Please tell me more about what you mean by 'motherhood isn't softsoaped and treated with rose tinted glasses.'

Rachel wrote back,

'When you get pregnancy books, magazines, pictures etc anything hard or horrible is often glossed over or ignored. The women always look happy, well dressed, thin, and the baby is beautiful and asleep. There is a current of popular opinion that expects women to enjoy motherhood, to find it easy and a desire to not frighten pregnant women or new mothers with anything other than a few terrifying birth stories.

When I was struggling with PND [Post Natal Depression] and PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] after the birth of my daughter I found this very hard indeed. I didn't feel like these mothers, everyone expected me to be happy and enjoying my baby. In reality I hated it, didn't bond with my

daughter for months, was utterly miserable, but I didn't feel like I could talk to anyone about it, especially on Bounty and Netmums where there was very little hint of it. Any criticism of children or the whole experience was quickly glossed over with 'oh dear, there there' and laughed off or ignored. I still don't particularly enjoy a lot of parenthood, but Mumsnet is somewhere I know I can go and talk/read about people who feel the same.'

Rachel begins her response using the indefinite pronoun 'you' in referring to mothers in general - 'when *you* get pregnancy books....' A 'rose-tinted' canonical narrative of motherhood is constructed against which, she says, switching into the first person, 'I was struggling...' Her separating of her written response into two sections narratively constructs different types of discourse – firstly the macro level of the wider parenting culture and secondly, the micro-level of her personal experience of becoming a mother. Rachel's use of extreme case formulations, for example, 'always', also emphasizes that her experience - her 'reality' - is at odds with what she feels is culturally expected: 'The women *always* look happy ... *everyone* expected me to be happy and enjoying my baby.' Like Louise, Rachel sets up a wider parenting culture against her own experience, and this creates the pattern for her subsequent narrative – 'anything hard or horrible is often glossed over or ignored'. Her first person experience of struggling with post-natal depression and post-traumatic stress disorder she tells me was 'very hard indeed'. The disconnect between Rachel's personal narrative and wider parenting culture of what mothers are 'supposed to feel' is signified by her depression, 'I didn't *feel* like these mothers...' She brings in other popular UK parenting forums by name – Bounty and Netmums - aligning them with what she frames as a normative ideal of happy, uncritical mothering that she felt alienated from. The extract ends with Rachel finding recognition in Mumsnet where she knows she can go and talk, and read about people who *feel 'the same'* as her, thus she rounds off her narrative of isolation and solipsism with a resolution of sorts.

### ***Finding redemption***

In her story of becoming a mother Rachel related her discovery of Mumsnet. In both the email and face-to-face interviews she described how using Mumsnet helped her to recognise her post-natal depression (PND). Rachel told me in our fourth email exchange,

‘... it wasn’t until I read an honest post on Mumsnet that I realised that I was ill, wasn’t alone and that I could get fixed. Revelation. I didn’t want the cocoon of fake sympathy, I wanted shared experience that I could relate to, I wanted to know that I wasn’t the only person who felt that way and I didn’t want to feel like I had to hide some part of what I was feeling to save someone else’s idea of what PND should be like, didn’t want to have to hold back in order to get help.’

Rachel framed her first use of Mumsnet as a pivotal moment ‘it wasn’t *until...*’ that caused a change in her experience ‘I *realized* that I was ill, wasn’t alone’ and gave her hope, ‘I *could* get fixed’. Her inclusion of the single-word sentence, ‘Revelation’, in particular, indicates that she found enlightenment, verisimilitude and redemption on Mumsnet in contrast to other online spaces that she found alienating. By stating ‘I didn’t want to save someone else’s idea of what PND should be like’, Rachel implies an imaginary other against which the particular meaning of *her* experiences of depression are defined and made individual. The phrase is intertextual in that its meaning is affected by the meanings established in a perceived canonical narrative that suffering from post natal depression is a common experience of early motherhood, as implied by Netmums’ manager SR (Chapter 5). Rather than accepting the meaning of this cultural narrative, Rachel constructs her own meaning through rejecting the opportunity to frame her depression as generic to the wider parenting culture. While the phrase is unresolved in that she does not explicitly state what this ‘someone’s else’s idea’ of PND is, the implication is that her discovery of Mumsnet rescued her, enabling her to construct a narrative identity for



herself as a mother that was acceptable to her. On Mumsnet she found both recognition of the 'self' she had been (sameness) and somewhere she felt her emotional experiences could be openly discussed. In this way she evaded a prescribed motherhood identity - 'someone else's idea' of how she should feel. By writing that she 'didn't want to have to hold back in order to get help' Rachel emphasizes how important it was to her to remain true to her sense of who she is. In Ricoeur's (1992) terms she was able to experience her selfhood as continuous.

Notably, like Rachel, Louise used the word 'revelation' in her email interview when writing of her discovery of Mumsnet. After she had written in a previous email that she felt parenting forums were especially important for single parents like herself because they offer a sense of community, in the third email of questions I asked,

'When writing about forums like Mumsnet's 'sense of community' you said, 'you can 'talk' to people who can make you feel better (or make you feel worse if they are judgmental)'.

Please can you tell me about some specific experiences of your own relating to parenting forums making you feel better and making you feel worse. Write as much as you can.'

Louise wrote back,

'There is a topic on Mumsnet called 'Has having children affected your mental health?' (in parenting forum). I think everyone should be forced to read it before having children. People are not honest in real life about the realities of having children and present a 'coping' front. This thread made me see that some of my experiences; boredom, regret, loss of identity, frustration, depression were not isolated. There have been other threads from 'non-maternal' posters who, while they don't regret having children, would probably

choose not to have them if they had to live their lives again. That also made me feel better as I kind of feel the same. I don't wish to not have my son, or for anything to happen to him (god forbid!) but day to day life is so hard and not very rewarding, that to hear that others are not natural mothers was a revelation. People just don't admit to that sort of thing down at the swings/baby groups.'

As noted above, Louise drew on a narrative repeatedly emphasizing the importance of telling the truth about what motherhood 'really entails' and here, in stating that people should be forced to read the thread prior to having children, she frames Mumsnet as a repository for this truth. In this superior positioning of Mumsnet Louise juxtaposes the forum with quotidian parenting culture where, she writes, 'people are not honest' about parenthood and 'present a 'coping' front'. The feelings Louise lists that Mumsnet helped her to recognize 'were not isolated' pertain to aspects of motherhood that have impinged on the control she has over her life and on her well being – 'boredom, regret, loss of identity, frustration, depression'. The implication is that Mumsnet is a space where individual identities that have been sidelined or lost through the experience of motherhood can be redeemed. As did Rachel and Donna, the other two Mumsnet users I interviewed, Louise positions herself as belonging among 'non-maternal posters' on Mumsnet. The forum enables her and others so inclined to express their ambivalence about being mothers that they consider to be unspeakable in everyday life, for example that 'they don't regret having children but would probably choose not to have them if they had to live their lives again'. In selecting a Mumsnet thread on mental health as demonstrative of how it has made her feel better Louise positions the website as authoritative where, similarly to Rachel, she found an underlying truthfulness that she seemingly had not found in 'real life' or elsewhere on the web.

The recognition of their narratives of loss and depression in other mothers' posts on the Mumsnet forum afforded Rachel and Louise the

basis to construct a narrative of redemption from the alienation they felt from wider canonical narratives of maternal culture. However, Mumsnet was also constructed as a space requiring a degree of rhetorical skill and identification with a particular way of being a mother that arguably takes for granted that users have particular forms of cultural capital – as cited in Chapter 3, 72% Mumsnet users are degree educated or beyond, and 69% are in full or part-time employment (Mumsnet Census survey, 2011). The narratives created in interviews in my study suggest that this way of being involved the discursive performance of ‘non-maternal’ identities.

### ***Performing non-maternal identities***

In common with Mumsnetter Donna, who described herself as having ‘always been really unmaternal’, Louise and Rachel both foregrounded non-maternal identities as their core identities in their interviews. Louise positioned herself as belonging among other ‘non-maternal posters’ on the Mumsnet forum, which she framed as enabling her to say the (normatively) unsayable. For example, in the extract quoted above regarding her identification with those who do not regret having children but ‘would probably choose not to have them if they had to live their lives again’. When I emailed to ask Louise to tell me more about what she meant by non-maternal mothers and natural mothers she wrote back,

‘Natural mothers in my opinion are the kind of people who never want to put their baby down, are into 'attachment parenting', extended breastfeeding, etc. People who are consumed completely by becoming a parent. It's like their previous selves disappear forever and having a baby is the best thing ever to happen to them. I don't understand people who say 'oh I was done with my old life' - why? Were they just pretending to enjoy their lives? I don't get it. Everything their child does is amazing, they feel so much 'overwhelming' love and are always posting on social media about it. Loads of pictures etc. Non maternal posters are the

people who had children but it didn't really change their view of themselves - they love their children but sometimes think life would have been easier if they hadn't had them. I suppose it's just having a child for some people is not a joyous experience as it's cracked up to be.'

In perpetuating a binary opposition between 'natural mothers' whose 'previous selves disappear forever' and people 'who had children but it didn't really change their view of themselves', Louise implies that these are mutually exclusive positions. Retaining one's previous identity precludes the possibility of also being maternal. By discursively labeling different types of mothers in this way Louise is able to position herself as identifying strongly with one type – the non-maternal posters – and in the process reject what she frames as the normative ('natural') expectation of being 'completely consumed by becoming a parent'. Louise's positioning here echoes in part manager JR's who explicitly stated that Mumsnet was set up to provide an intentional alternative to the canonical narrative of 'soft-focus, fluffy' sanitized motherhood that, in line with the website's stated purpose, operates *for* parents (Chapter 5). While the notion of a prescribed account of 'natural' motherhood as ultimately fulfilling and unproblematic, allowing women little or no expression of negative feelings is not a new one in the literature (Marshall, 1991), the affordance offered by online spaces for mothers to express other non-maternal identities is a new and powerful opportunity. Pedersen and Smithson (2013) have suggested that Mumsnet in particular offers women a forum where they can perform 'alternative femininities' in (relative) anonymity, albeit according to an arguably restricted linguistic code.

While Rachel did not use the term 'non-maternal' herself she repeatedly emphasized a fundamental distinction between her identity as a mother and her identity as a person, telling me of her realization – reached in part through her use of Mumsnet - that she has to privilege the latter, and compromise the former, in order to 'stay sane'. The following extract from Rachel's email interview is particularly demonstrative of the particular way of 'speaking' freely about her feelings about motherhood

that she consistently framed as permissible on Mumsnet but less so elsewhere,

‘On a lighter note I know Mumsnet is somewhere I can write that I hate nativities and school plays, that my kids are driving me batshit crazy, that I regret having children sometimes, even that I enjoyed my second birth and would do it again in a second etc without people being shocked; often with someone else coming in and saying “yes me too, hate those fucking recorders”. Whereas when I was standing at the school gates just after the nativity, the mother of one of my daughter’s classmates said “what did you think about the nativity then?” “Oh I didn’t go” I replied (with a smile!), ‘I’m not keen on them. I hate those screeching recorders, nose picking and bumscratching children and the terrible plays. DH went instead’. She looked at me with horror and hasn’t spoken to me since, apparently they are an important part of childhood and I should enjoy them and enjoy watching my children perform.’

Here Rachel draws a sharp distinction between the identities she feels able to express anonymously on Mumsnet and the restrictiveness of the normative maternal identity she implies is expected in real life. The first part of the extract sees her identifying herself as a Mumsnetter, relishing in the sense of sameness she had not found in wider parenting culture. Rachel then tells me about an occasion when she transgressed normative social expectations and transposed the matter-of-fact style of communication and sarcastic humour expected on Mumsnet to a real life encounter at the school gates. Somewhat paradoxically, as she is expounding her hatred of children’s performances, this extract is highly performative – Rachel employing dramatic devices, such as stage directions in parentheses ‘(with a smile!)’, and transposing acronyms that are used in typed form on the forum to her reported speech, ‘DH’ (darling husband). The other mother’s shock and horror at Rachel freely

expressing her negative attitude to nativity plays serves as an emblem of the canonical parenting culture that, Rachel feels, dictates how she ought to behave as a mother, a culture that Mumsnet offers her an escape from.

In making available identities other than those prescribed by more traditional maternal culture, Mumsnet is clearly a space where these women found empowerment. The website does pride itself on its feminist credentials. In addition, the website provides anonymous online sociality offering little expectation of reciprocity; users may speak directly without any social fallout, Rachel's attempted transposition of the direct online mode of communicating to real life is less than successful as a form of face-to-face communication. While my sample size is small, it might in Rachel's case be argued that the offline performance of identities that work online may lead to, or exacerbate, real life social isolation. The exaggerated and humour-inflected performance of non-maternal identity may be employed to make up for the lack of gestural synchronicity available in online communication. However, it also reflects an apparent need to maintain a position that runs counter to the perceived canonical narrative of all-consuming motherhood, that is to show that one is an individual at all costs.

The concept of ambivalence was especially helpful in relation to Mumsnet users' narratives. Each of the three mothers I spoke to displayed ambivalence about motherhood and appeared to largely eschew any notion of being a part of a real life community of parents, preferring to position themselves as different to and not fitting in with everyday parenting culture. It is noteworthy that the successful performance of non-maternal identities seemed to require the construction of a relatively fixed and mundane picture of quotidian maternal culture/identity in each of the three cases. This construction of canonical mothering then served as a tangible counterpoint that could be rejected and these women could position themselves against. As seen above, both Rachel and Louise's stark comparisons of real life and online communication among mothers emphasised their identities as individuals transgressing normative maternal cultures and telling the truth about motherhood that, as Louise said, 'people just don't admit to down at the swings...' While I can make

no broad claims due to my sample size, that the three Mumsnet users I interviewed performed non-maternal identities (from their reluctance or ambivalence to admit to ever wanting children) suggests that they were reproducing an identity that may have come to be culturally expected of 'Mumsnetters'. Indeed, it is arguable that these Mumsnetters constructed maternal ambivalence itself as a canonical narrative of motherhood.

#### **7.4 Becoming a mother: narratives of gain, support and affirmation**

While the transition to motherhood as involving a fundamental shift in women's daily routines can be seen as a more or less universal feature of a common culture of motherhood (Thomson et al., 2011), the Netmums users' accounts of becoming mothers differed considerably to those of Mumsnet users. In their narratives Netmums users Emily and Nicola constructed the transition to motherhood as gainful and fundamentally desired.

Emily, 25 at interview, is a white British single mother with a five-year-old daughter. When we met face-to-face in her home she narrated the transition to motherhood as an experience that gave her renewed purpose, beginning by stating that it had changed her life for the better before sketching out a picture of a chaotic life prior to the birth of her daughter. Whilst she told me that when she became accidentally pregnant after a one-night stand and 'did not think [she] could look after a child at all' Emily went on to narrate the experience of becoming a mother as giving her a focus and greater responsibility where previously she had been 'off the rails'. She drew on a canonical narrative of motherhood as a status to be desired, stating that although her daughter wasn't planned she 'obviously' did not regret it. Emily's relationship with her own mother, also a single parent, and her geographical relocation in search of a better life after her daughter was born were implicated in the transition to motherhood.

Nicola was 36 at interview, white British and married with two daughters aged two years and 11 weeks. The experience of being unexpectedly widowed aged 30 was the critical moment in Nicola's narrative. Subsequently finding another partner and becoming a mother represented reparation rather than rupture— a lucky return to her desired life course trajectory of having a family that she thought she would never have. As well as providing the foundational context for Nicola's experience of becoming a mother, the narrative of bereavement informed her therapeutic use of online forums, motivating her to share her experiences with others in similar situations.

Although their circumstances were notably different – Emily a single mother who became pregnant accidentally and Nicola's motherhood representing and embodying the fulfillment of a long-held dream – they both drew on a canonical narrative of motherhood as symbolic of “the good life” (Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001; Bruner, 2004). Unlike the Mumsnetters, Rachel and Louise, whose narratives of forum-use validated their identities as women, Nicola and Emily framed their use of the Netmums forum as confirming their identities according to a culturally ascribed motherhood identity.

Netmums user Helen framed becoming a mother as the next step to mature adulthood, pinpointing four key changes that have occurred in her life since she became a mother: she has more responsibility; her career path has changed; her social life has changed; and she has moved to a new location. As seen in the previous chapter, she framed her online seeking of alternative practical advice to that her family offered her as the key purpose of her Netmums use. While Netmums can be seen here as supporting Helen's new mothering identity, this was not a topic she said anymore about, and so her narrative features less in this chapter which focuses on Emily and Nicola.



Like Rachel, Nicola foregrounded sleep as the first change that occurred upon becoming a mother. Her response to my question about how life had changed since becoming a parent began,

‘Oh my goodness me it’s just (.) the first thing is the sleep (Joe – mm) I’m- I was very much a person who needed my sleep (J – right) and (.) you just can’t have it as a parent now and it’s just amazing how I can be waking up- every three hours is good- and still manage to function – um and of course at the moment being on maternity leave I’m not at work (J – yeah) I love the time I spend with her (J – mm) I-I adore it but I do miss (.) just being at work in terms of ‘me time’ if that makes sense, not the whole relaxing ‘me time’ but just (.) my doing a- a job that (.) (J – yeah) you know I do, I don’t have to be a mum to do that, it challenges me (J – mm) makes me think, I’m interacting with people that I wouldn’t be interacting with if I was just sort of stay at home mum if that makes sense um (.) I mean i- as a parent, most of my friends now are parents, the people that I see more than - friends before I had children (J – yeah) it’s the ones that have got children that I seem to see more of now purely because there are only certain times of day that we *can* meet.’

She characterizes her ‘self of the past’ as somebody who needed her sleep, but while Nicola and Rachel’s (Mumsnetter) experiences may have been similar, at this point the narratives diverge. By moving seamlessly from the first person into the second person ‘you just can’t have it as a parent now’ Nicola frames the lack of sleep as acceptable and canonical to early parenthood, rather than being emblematic of a dramatic shock to her own sleep pattern that she was determined to reclaim. She positions herself as not only accepting it, but as being amazed at her resilience in the face of it. Nicola goes on to tell me that, although she loves and adores the time she spends with her baby daughter, she does miss ‘just

being at work in terms of ‘me time’. What she is describing are experiences common to many contemporary mothers (Thomson et al., 2011), and not entirely different from Louise’s narrative about the incompatibility of her working and parenting identities, but again they are framed less dramatically. Nicola is talking here, as both Rachel and Louise did, about a loss of individual identity but she glosses over it as a state that entails an inevitable adjustment rather than foregrounding it as one constituting an irreversible rupture. Motherhood for Nicola involves a multiplicity of identities but these are presented as co-existing in harmony; her individual identity and social practices are shaped by her new identity as a mother and are represented as unproblematic. Her hesitation - ‘I’m – I was’ also implies a willingness to take up and accept an ascribed identity that co-exists with others now that she is a mother.

At the end of the extract Nicola demonstrates this fitting of work around family life rather than the other way around, privileging her identity as a mother. In telling me about the changes in her social life since becoming a mother – ‘most of my friends now are parents, the people that I see more than - friends before I had children’, Nicola charts the temporality of life before and after becoming a mother, framing the shift in social circumstances as inevitable and unproblematic.

Emily also constructed the experience of becoming a mother as gainful. Not unlike Louise, she intimated she was shocked and in denial about becoming accidentally pregnant. However, once her daughter was born she described the responsibility of looking after a baby making her more focused,

‘It has changed for the better (.) in general. Um (.) Before I had her (.) I’d say I was a bit off the rails – um – (J - right) (.) When I was 19 I moved up here, I moved to (the North-East) to go to Uni, I met (.) who my ex-partner is now – Pete (J – right) um (.) but (.) - both of us were too young to be in a relationship. I didn’t really go to Uni at all we jus- didn’t really do anything for about a year and a half, I had enough (.) I went back to [my mum’s], and Ele was actually conceived on

a one-night-stand with somebody else so (J – OK) (...) so you can im- like- I was a bit off the rails at that point in my life, (J – right) um (.) did not think that I could look after a child at all. My mum was really supportive and my mum (.) only (.) well I was living with her but you know she gave me a choice (.) you know I can either stay here with her, you know get a job or go back to Uni and she'll help me out or I could go on my merry way and do whatever I want, so it kind of changed me a bit and in that sense it chilled me right out as in obviously I wasn't going out and getting drunk every night like I was – I know I was only really young but (.) yeah everyth- it's made me more focused (J - OK) – definitely I mean- like- she wasn't planned but obviously I don't regret it now.'

Here Emily narrates her life experience immediately prior to becoming a mother as chaotic, repeating the phrase 'I was a bit off the rails' twice in this extract as she did again later in the interview. Through her description of returning to her mother's home, Emily characterizes her 'self of the past' as childlike and lacking purpose and responsibility, the manner in which her daughter was conceived adding weight to this characterization. Her unfinished phrase 'I know I was only really young but...' suggests Emily attempting to position herself in opposition to a canonical narrative of young single mothers as irresponsible and leading chaotic lives. Emily's introduction of her ex-partner who is not the father of her daughter positions him as an important character in her narrative, simultaneously symbolizing both the chaos of her life prior to becoming a mother and the hope that conventional stable family life represents. It is also notable that Emily employs an external voice of authority – 'both of us were too young to be in a relationship' - possibly her mother's, who she also describes as giving her a choice. Thus her mother is positioned as having control and infantilizing her in the process. By going on to tell me that her daughter wasn't planned but that she '*obviously*' does not regret it now Emily implies that she has felt regret at some point, perhaps at becoming

pregnant accidentally. Unlike the narrative told by Louise, who is also a single mother who became pregnant accidentally, Emily does not narrate any feelings of regret after her daughter's birth. If she expressed regret Emily would perhaps run the risk of positioning herself as too young within the canonical narrative of 'young single mothers' that she draws on (Phoenix, 1990). Notably, Emily also draws on a wider societal narrative of having to enjoy motherhood, described by both Louise and Rachel as the status quo that they positioned themselves in opposition to. In contrast Emily consistently positioned her daughter as the central character in her narrative, rather than herself. Indeed, the unquestioned notion that becoming a mother has led to an inevitable diminishing of her individual preferences was a recurrent feature of Emily's narrative. As she said, 'my life is through her now'.

Emily decided to leave the village where she had grown up and lived with her mother and move to Northeast England to rekindle her relationship with her ex-partner. Starting a new life elsewhere with all the potential uncertainties it entailed is a critical moment in her narrative of motherhood. She first told me about this in answer to a question I sent during our email interview regarding her use of parenting forums,

'Joe: Tell me about the first time you used Netmums, or any parenting forum, and what you used it for?'

Emily wrote,

'I first used Netmums a couple of years ago. In 2011 I moved from Wales up to the North East of England after getting back in to a relationship with an old flame leaving all my friends and family behind, as you can imagine this was quite difficult and a friend of mine suggested I had a look on Netmums. I found the meet a mum board, even though I didn't actually meet up with anyone until last year from there I found a few friends who I would just talk to over the phone/

email etc. It was also really useful initially to find out what there is to do with children in this area as I did not know it at all.'

In leaving all her friends and family behind and her use of the phrase 'old flame' Emily characterizes herself as a romantic figure on a quest for a fairytale ending. The extract also shows that Emily's first use of Netmums relates directly to her decision to leave her and her daughter's home and move to another area of the country. Being recommended Netmums by a friend and using it as a tool to find friends in the 'real world' chimes with SR's narrative of Netmums being founded on the traditional notions of real world, local communities and as complementing offline modes of social support (Chapter 5).

In the face-to-face interview Emily fleshed out some more details in response to my question regarding how her life as a mother living in the North East has changed,

'I don't think I'd be the same now had I not had her I mean like where I'm from, from a really small town ... an it's (.) y'know, you're either really successful and you move away or you're just stuck in the same old (Joe – OK) y'know the same old thing every day. Um ... on the coast yeah- so it's just a really small village ... (J – right) Um- there's just nothing there- y'know I was working in cafes and hotels n there's just absolutely nothing for anybody really unless you are super intelligent an you can yknow (J - sure OK OK) get a job – but most of the people who yknow get degrees- get good experience do move away-

Joe: -But then you moved away?

Emily: I did but (...) because I (.) (*sighs*) (.) (*to herself*: howlonghaveibin?) Two years I've been here-2011 I came here (J - right) an that's because I got talking to Pete again (*small laugh over 'Pete'*)

Joe: yeah you mentioned this in your email

Emily: yeah- got talking to him again – an he was visiting (.)  
me - I came up here a couple of times, yknow an Ele really  
got on (J – with Pete?) Yeah - she doesn't see her Dad –  
they've never had a relationship – so yeah I jus- he kept  
saying 'Oh move up move up' – an I thought, 'well what have  
I got here? I've got nothing– I jus thought well it's worth a  
gamble (.)'

In this extract Emily frames becoming a mother as a contributory factor to her not getting 'stuck in the same old thing everyday' in her small hometown, and her repetition of there being 'absolutely nothing for anybody really' constructs her life as following an upward trajectory. However, the position she takes up is an ambivalent one as, unlike those who moved away because they are 'really successful' or 'super intelligent', Emily tells me that she moved away at her ex-partner Pete's behest. There is also ambivalence in the end of the extract where Emily draws on a discourse of romantic idealism, positioning herself as having nothing and thinking 'it's worth a gamble' – a phrase which emphasizes the role of luck in her narrative, yet also sees her actively taking the chance for a potentially 'better life'.

Notably, as well as attributing her use of Netmums to relocating to a different region, Emily told me that she began using the forum again when she broke up with Pete for the second time. She positioned herself as '*facing* life as a single parent' after the break-up, implying that the ideal situation for parenting had been lost. Emily's use of Netmums was sporadic. However, each time she connected to the forum it was directly related to shifts in her everyday circumstances – moving home, breaking up, and for medical advice. This demonstrates that Emily engaged with Netmums in times of particular *practical* need – to provide support following changes in her everyday life.

### ***Redemption from bereavement***

Netmums user Nicola told a narrative of tragic loss, but rather than it being framed as regretful, it was her foundational story of becoming a mother, reigniting a lifecourse career that she thought her bereavement had denied her. In fact, this was so recurrent in her narrative that it is arguably the only (meaningful) narrative she told.

‘Joe: You did cover both areas with thinking about the positive changes but also the more challenge- or negative changes as well...

‘Nicola: To be honest the negative things like- obviously like the work and losing that challenge and seeing less of my friends (J – yeah) it’s – I wouldn’t change it for anything (J – sure) the positives far outweigh (.) the negatives an (.) (*Gestures to baby who is in pram beside her*) yeah

Joe: (*laughs*) – yeah (...) And do – I mean did you- so –so I mean you talked about this you know ‘me time’ at work so it’s kind of about something that’s separate to being a mum? (N – yeah) (*inaudible*) I mean is that- the whole idea of being a mum- was that something you always wanted to-?

Nicola: Yeah, yeah-well- ya see my sort of personal um story is a little bit sad really (Joe – right) ‘cause I was married previously (Joe – sure) and um my husband and I um we had talked about having children an’ that (Joe – mm) but y’know we were both concerned about jobs an’ that (Joe - mm) and I lost him (Joe - right) in 2007 um I was only 30 at the time (.) um he basically um had um something that er made his heart become inflamed and he just basically dropped down dead so I was (Joe – mm) just- at 30 I thought, ‘I’m never going to have children (Joe – right) now, it’s way too late’ (Joe – right) you know ‘how am I ever going to meet somebody?’- ‘Do I want to meet somebody to start

off-‘ (Joe - mm mm) ‘ and then ‘how am I ever going to meet somebody who wants children? But um (.) I started doing the whole- well tried the internet dating and that was a scary thing to do (Joe – right, right) an I went into work one day and said to my– just happened to say to my colleagues, ‘why doesn’t any of my friends know any nice single men?’ and one of them went ‘actually, I do’, set us up on a blind date and um he’s um just under 2- 2 years younger than me, he’d been single for ages and y’know we both said that at some point we wanted children, we got on really really well (Joe – right) an then now- yeah that was 2009 and now we have the 2 bestest girls (Joe - *laughs*) in the whole world so- (.) yeah so, as I say, I always wanted to be a mum (Joe - mm) but I just never thought it was going to happen at one point so I’m incredibly lucky.’

The extract begins with me trying to elicit more narrative detail from Nicola about what I refer to in the interview as ‘the more negative changes’ - missing having time and space at work where she does not have to ‘be a mum’. Nicola’s response was to reiterate the examples she had already given but then to state, ‘I wouldn’t change it for anything’, ‘the positives far outweigh the negatives’ after which she gestured to her baby who was present at the interview, which took place in the café at her local ASDA supermarket. These stock, well-worn responses and the presence of her baby daughter served as an emblem of her idealistic story of motherhood, supporting Nicola in framing her story now as wholly positive and allowed no possibility of disclosing any more about the more challenging aspects of becoming a mother. She notably downplayed the genuinely tragic nature of her recent life experience, framing her personal story as ‘a bit sad really’. This minimizing perhaps operates as a form of foreclosure on her difficult story and so prevents her from revisiting the feelings it may evoke. Nicola does not draw on the tropes of tragedy in the performance of this narrative. Her story of bereavement is told in the form of an unelaborated report. There is no narrative tension suggested here:



the tragedy happened. As the interviewer I see now how I colluded in this way of relating to the unexpected death of her partner. But perhaps from Nicola's perspective it just was. However, the loss of her partner deprived her in the short term at least of the potential to have children. She did not know if she was going to meet somebody else or indeed somebody who wanted children, or if she even wanted to meet somebody else. Nicola's twin desires are met in her present story: the ideal of two-parent family life and fulfilling the dream of having a child that she could not have but wanted with her first husband.

The Internet is briefly introduced as Nicola tells me she tried it for dating but this is immediately portrayed as a 'scary' experience and discarded, Nicola preferring the "real world" where one day she just happened to ask colleagues why nobody knew any nice single men and was promptly set up on a blind date. It is noteworthy that Nicola interrupts herself to rephrase '... I went into work one day and said to my- *just happened* to say to my colleagues' as it emphasizes the predominant role of chance in her story, lending it a certain fairytale romance which would be more difficult to construct from the concerted effort of engaging in internet dating with a specific goal in mind. Just as tragic fate took over her life story when her first husband died, so, conversely and more serendipitously, her fortunes took an upward turn. Foregrounding fate as dictating her life course Nicola is able to keep a safe distance from the tragic events that took place, preventing her from dwelling on them and enabling the reconstruction of a happy story for herself. Nicola then jumps forward, missing out a period of four years from meeting her husband in 2009, to the time of the interview where they have 'the two bestest girls in the whole world'. This flashing forward sees the plot of the narrative taking precedence over the characters in it – Nicola gives very little detail about either of her husbands, instead jumping to the happy ending of her story – having the children. Her use of the phrase 'now we have the two bestest girls in the whole world' is significant. By the superlative she firmly fixes the trajectory of her narrative as one aligned to a canonical romantic narrative of conventional family life.

Nicola's personal story of losing her first husband, then finding redemption and life resuming its desired trajectory through meeting her current husband and having children forms the bedrock of her account. This is also demonstrated in her repetition of it in different contexts; on the Netmums forum and also in a blog she started writing a few months after we met. Nicola's narrative of becoming a mother would not be as it is without the loss of her first husband. *That* loss represents the point of rupture and finding another partner and having children *together* signifies reparation – the longed-for happy ending of an unfulfilled difficult chapter in her story. Nicola did not elaborate much on her use of the Netmums forum, writing in her email interview,

'I like to be able to share some of the things I have gone through with other parents in the hope that it offers them some support'

Here, the key turning-points in Nicola's narrative of bereavement and finding happiness again can be seen as directly informing her use of Netmums as a means of sharing her story in order to help others.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

This chapter addressed how women narrated turning points in their experiences of the transition to motherhood in their interviews, and where in the interviews the narration of these turning points was related to their use of online parenting forums. It identified and discussed the identities that women constructed as mothers and the ways in which the online parenting forums provided particular contexts for women to construct their identities as women and mothers. Reflecting the themes concerning wider cultural narratives of motherhood discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the chapter also shows how mothers identified with or rejected canonical narratives of motherhood and the ways in which these two forums enabled them to do so.

According to their differing circumstances some women narrated motherhood as precipitating difficulties, while others constructed becoming a mother as a wholly positive experience. Control was a key construct in transition to motherhood narratives. In their narratives women described relinquishing, retaining or reclaiming control, in relation to motherhood and/ or other identities. They also identified or dis-identified with canonical narratives of motherhood. However, no matter how difficult or easy becoming a mother was remembered, the mothers' narratives at interview framed the present as positive and their future narrative trajectories as hopeful. This supports theories that suggest that narrative work has a psychosocial function for the individual as well as being a matter of the conventions of narrative form and structure. In other words, it is through narrative that life experiences are made sense of or 'made present' (Schiff, 2012; Freeman, 2010), and meaningful lives constructed. Temporality is a key function of narrative: hope for the future is constructed through the recollection of past experiences and has the potential to reconfigure meaning in light of the present (Ricoeur, 1984).

While each mother's story was unique, the stories have nonetheless some similarities. As set out at the beginning of the chapter, one aim was to analyse how narratives of becoming a mother and identities of motherhood are constituted in research interviews. These mothers' stories of motherhood need to be understood through the prism of narrative. Through the *process* of narrative co-construction, whether in the context of a research interview or through positioning in relation to an Other which may include an entity such as a website, shared and divergent understandings of the world are co-constructed that support the forging of livable social identities (Bahktin, 1981; Phoenix, 2013a; Butler, 2004; Davies & Harré, 1990; Georgakopoulou & De Fina, 2012). While the women all presented their lives now as livable, there were marked differences in their narratives of becoming mothers, most notably involving whether it had or had not been experienced as meaningful for the lives they wanted. The two online forums enabled the women differing

opportunities to construct stories that identified with or were in opposition to canonical narratives of 'the good mother'.

Netmums users Nicola and Emily's life experiences prior to having children involved bereavement and chaos respectively. In their cases the advent of motherhood was narrated as redemptive. Both cases aligned themselves to a canonical narrative of motherhood as unquestionably desirable and symbolic of 'the good life' – Emily narrating the experience as offering the hope of a more stable existence and Nicola fulfilling what she thought was a lost dream in becoming a mother. Conversely, rather than experiencing motherhood as a resolution, Mumsnetters Rachel and Louise seemed to seek redemption *from* motherhood, constructing the experience of becoming mothers as having somewhat thwarted their ambitions and restricting their personhood. It was their negative experiences of early motherhood that gave Mumsnet users Rachel and Louise's lives more meaning to them now, Mumsnet itself being framed as crucial in them finding recognition for their individual selves. Rachel had more cultural capital than Emily and Nicola (she was married to a successful academic and about to embark on a PhD) and Louise worked in the dance music industry. They thereby constructed cultural narratives extolling the primacy of selves as distinct from selves defined by their relationships with their children. In positioning themselves prior to becoming mothers as being free to construct their identities and control their lives, Rachel and Louise both experienced the transition to motherhood as a trauma that led to clinical diagnosis of post-natal depression. Rachel and Louise described their depression as related to lack of control and a sense of loss due to feeling unable to express themselves as individuals. For them both, becoming a mother was accompanied by a sense of shock. In their narratives of the Mumsnet users in my study, the website was framed as pivotal to the reconstruction / rediscovery of their identities as individuals, which for them had been lost or compromised in becoming mothers. In this sense Mumsnet can be framed as the 'Other' with an identity of its own, against which an individual parenting (mothering) identity can be discursively forged and

maintained (Turkle, 2012), and in which non-maternal identities can be performed.

Conversely, the two Netmums users narrated their experiences of motherhood as being more consonant with canonical narratives that motherhood 'should be' a positive and gainful experience. These two women consulted that forum predominantly for support and affirmation in everyday practical parenting decisions. Despite having experienced difficult life events, these Netmums users did not refer to feeling or being depressed. Perhaps, having experienced physical loss and lack of control prior to motherhood they were more accepting of what was framed as an expected and inevitable lack of control on becoming mothers. The practice of using online parenting forums may also interact with and be refracted through wider social and cultural narratives, for example pertaining to social class, and be indicative of differing levels of cultural capital, and therefore expectation of what life experiences are acceptable and livable.

In conclusion, among the four cases discussed in depth in this chapter key differences emerged in narrative constructions of the two web forums, shaping the meanings their respective users attributed to their experiences of motherhood, evidenced in particular in their narratives of turning points relating to becoming mothers. Broadly speaking, the different narratives told about the transition to motherhood turned on the different ways in which the women's experiences of it were constructed as meaningful for the lives they wanted. On the one hand, Netmums users accepted and embraced their identities as mothers generally in accordance with culturally expected and accepted meanings of motherhood, while Mumsnet users identified less with the dominant normative parenting culture in their experiences of becoming mothers.

## **Chapter 8: Discussion: theoretical conclusions and methodological issues**

### **8.1: Introduction:**

This final chapter brings together the four analysis chapters towards a conclusion. The chapter will be set out in four sections: First, I address theoretical conclusions, summarising the salient points and supporting evidence from each analysis chapter in relation to my main research questions; Second, I reflect back on methodological issues encountered and discuss limitations and how I might do it differently next time; Thirdly I offer an overall conclusion to my thesis; In the final section, I discuss the implications for future research on online parenting practices and identities and social support.

### **8.2: Theoretical conclusions**

#### **8.2.1: Dominant discourses of parenting on the websites**

This part of the study sought to understand and make sense of the websites as visual and discursive artefacts in the increasingly image-driven culture of digital media.

Both Mumsnet and Netmums were laid out in columns similar to a newspaper website. This was particularly the case with Mumsnet where headline stories were incorporated at the top of the homepage. Images were the more dominant mode on Netmums while writing was on Mumsnet. Netmums also used brighter colours – such as vivid green and pink - than Mumsnet, the palette of which was predominantly muted blue and white. The differences in their colour schemes were seen to reflect different perspectives – Mumsnet's suggesting a more serious / adult appeal not only relating to parenthood, while Netmums appealed to young children as well as adults, suggesting motherhood is all-encompassing.

Both Mumsnet and Netmums implicated their users through adverts and competitions, which emphasised the commodification of modern parenting. Each website's incorporation of aspects of wider culture suggested different positions in relation to it. Mumsnet positioned itself as central to key cultural events, while Netmums was seen to align itself with governmental agendas.

While both websites foregrounded a discourse of social community and constructed parenting as the domain of women, they did so in different ways. Dominant on Mumsnet was a discourse of individual independent womanhood and peer-to-peer pooling of knowledge and advice-swapping about parenting as one topic among others. Netmums foregrounded a discourse of all-encompassing child-centred motherhood over individual womanhood.

The visual architecture of the websites foregrounded whiteness as normative. Similarly, their visual construction was indicative of a popular discourse of heteronormativity in everyday parenting.

### ***Support on the websites***

Although Mumsnet constructs itself as an autonomous space for peer-to-peer advice, discourses of top-down professional 'knowledge' about parenting are arguably still embedded in the reproduction of societal power relations on its homepage. The fact that 'pooling knowledge' is the first function of Mumsnet mentioned, rather than 'advice' and 'support' suggests that the website is for those who have knowledge worth sharing. The phrase originally used on the website to describe its function - 'sharing 'know-how on the net' – suggesting that it was set up to tap into existing communities. Central to Netmums was its emphasis on real world local communities and support, the website constructed to complement these. A dedicated support section on the Netmums discussion forum, labeled 'the drop-in clinic', suggested a generic top-down and medicalised approach to support for mothers.

### ***Official ‘About us’ narratives on the websites***

In the narratives on the ‘About us’ pages of the websites key differences were seen. Netmums foregrounded collective identity connected to physical location, framing itself as a place for every parent. Mumsnet privileged individual identity through a personal experiential narrative of one of their managers. As small changes were made to this page during the period of analysis it is a story that is seemingly still being worked on - a well-worn story.

In constructing motherhood as all-encompassing and available to ‘every parent’, Netmums foregrounds sameness in its narrative identity. Conversely, in focusing on an individual experiential narrative as the foundation of its story, Mumsnet foregrounds selfhood, individual adult identities privileged over parenting or maternal identities, which positions the website as distinct from other popular parenting websites where the child is more central, such as Netmums and Bounty.

Netmums’ foregrounding of collective identity in their declaration that they are for ‘every parent’ may indicate a lack of engagement with diversity – after all, discourses of racialization and non-hetero sexualities were absent. In foregrounding selfhood through the personal narrative of one of their founders, without further visual, textual or verbal elaboration regarding racialization and non-hetero sexualities, Mumsnet also frames whiteness and heterosexuality as normative.

#### **8.2.2: The websites’ origins and framing: Managers’ narratives**

The second phase of my project sought to examine the websites’ construction and social significance through the narratives of their founders. This was important in providing further insight into the discourses that underpin popular online social support for parents. Narrative analysis was carried out on interviews with the managers of the respective websites – over the telephone and then some follow-up questions over email. The founders and moderators of Netmums and Mumsnet presented narratives consistent with the dominant discourses



found in the multimodal analysis. For example, the managers' narratives supported the websites' apparently different relationships to wider culture – JR positioned Mumsnet as on a par with multi-billion-dollar web brands, while SR positioned Netmums as dependent on big brands for survival.

The managers' narratives of their websites' inceptions had broad similarities. For example, both websites were framed as fulfilling a particular need for parents – JR and SR reiterating each website's officially stated aims 'to make parents' lives easier' (Mumsnet) and 'to help parents enjoy parenting more' (Netmums). Another similarity was that they both emphasised the notion of experienced parents handing on knowledge to newer and less knowledgeable parents, though this was described as occurring through different means by each. Mumsnet was positioned by manager JR as offering exclusively peer-to-peer advice, with anonymity foregrounded as important in enabling honesty in this. SR positioned Netmums as inextricably linked to local real world communities, emphasizing face-to-face support at a local level as the most valuable form of social support for parents, as well as stressing the importance of more instrumental forms of targeted social support.

Both SR and JR drew on discourses of top-down professional knowledge about parenting, constructing first-time parents as learning subjects, but positioning them differently. The foregrounding of peer-to-peer advice on Mumsnet positioned users as free agents in possession of the resources and knowledge to train one another to parent well. By founding Mumsnet on the story of her ingenuity in transforming an instance of parental failure into a gainful opportunity JR herself becomes emblematic of the website – embodying an aspirational narrative identity. Arguably the tragi-comic performative quality of JR's narrative also contributed to setting the tone for the matter-of-fact and 'witty' style that Mumsnet has become known for.

Conversely SR framed her and her co-founders' personal stories of post-natal-depression and need for local-level support as emblematic of motherhood. This story was interwoven with a canonical narrative of motherhood as inherently isolating - new mothers framed as lacking

knowledge and capital. Furthermore, by describing a key function of Netmums to provide 'continuity of action' between everyday parenting and support for clinical conditions such as PND, SR implied an engendering of a 'continuity of experience' through Netmums, linking everyday habitual practices and experiences of clinical depression. In emphasizing that moderation was especially important when the discussion forum was first introduced in order to set the right tone, SR openly described a process of interpellation taking place on Netmums'.

Gender was constructed differently in JR and SR's narratives. SR aligned Netmums with a canonical narrative of fitting work around family life, while JR drew on her experiences of gender inequality around being a mother in the workplace to position Mumsnet as challenging a canonical narrative that success as a mother and in one's career are incompatible.

Middle-class parenting practices, such as attending paid antenatal classes, were assumed to be desirable and therefore normative of 'good parenting' by both JR and SR. It was notable that both embedded in the context of the founding story of the disastrous holiday and co-constructively during the telephone interview between JR and I, shared middle-class experiences, values and ideals of parenting were assumed. This extends recent work suggesting that the most educationally advantaged parents have become the benchmark against which others parenting is assessed (Dermott & Pomati, 2015) into the online realm.

In becoming the most established UK parenting website, Mumsnet is arguably central to a key canonical narrative in wider modern parenting culture, but one that is oriented to middle-class tastes and practices. JR told an empowering entrepreneurial narrative of seizing opportunities and taking control that was congruent with Mumsnet's strapline of 'By parents for parents'. Indeed, indicative of Mumsnet's cultural dominance and the endurance of its narrative was that SR employed the Mumsnet story as a key device in her founding narrative of Netmums, the 'different kind of environment' of Mumsnet warranting the need for Netmums. This deferring to the culturally dominant Mumsnet narrative was part of a wider

reliance in SR's narrative on fate and chance, the protagonists often cast as unfortunate and not in control of their destinies.

### **8.2.3: Parent users' practices of using online parenting websites and forums**

The thesis also contributes to understanding the use of these websites as a social practice. Chapter six applied Shove et al.'s (2012) social practice theory to the six women's accounts of their use of online parenting forums, and in particular Mumsnet and Netmums.

Across my dataset four sub-practices constituted the overall practice of using online parenting websites. Firstly, the practice involved using search engines for informational support regarding parenting and other issues. Secondly, it constituted lurking on the message boards, a practice which some engaged in for entertainment and some for a form of vicarious support whereby the experiences shared online by others was drawn on and not necessarily reciprocated. Users' descriptions of lurking were seen to foster what Shove et al. (2012) describe as the self-monitoring of one's own practices through monitoring the performances of others. Thirdly, the practice involved actively sharing through posting on the forums. Amongst those in my sample who posted on forums regularly two forms of posting were broadly used - posting for emotional support and posting for informational support around childcare issues. Fourthly, the forums were used as a conduit to real-life offline social networking and accessing parenting support groups, a practice complementing face-to-face socializing.

The small size of my sample does not enable me to make broad claims about whether using the two websites involves distinctive practices. However, in the application of Shove et al.'s (2012) theories of practice to my data, the practices of using Mumsnet and Netmums were seen to differ in key ways, and some commonalities were seen between users' practices on each forum.

### ***Commitment and distinction***

All three Mumsnet users I spoke to were seen to identify strongly with that particular website, demonstrating a relatively high level of commitment to the practice of using Mumsnet more exclusively. For these mothers there was an apparently strong relationship between their understandings of their Mumsnet use and their positioning of themselves as in opposition to canonical maternal cultures, such as a shared aversion to their perceived expectation they should attend toddler groups in order to meet other parents with similar aged children. The three Mumsnet users openly expressed maternal ambivalence, to the extent that both Mumsnet and the interview encounters became spaces for them to perform non-maternal identities. This supports the notion, as drawn out by other theorists of feminist sociology that maternal ambivalence has itself become a canonical narrative of parenting/mothering (Stadlen, 2004; Cusk, 2001). It is noteworthy that this theme emerged so clearly from the analysis of Mumsnetters' narratives as it suggests the operation of a counterhegemonic discourse with a social class dimension – this counternarrative is arguably acceptable on Mumsnet due to its usership possessing a relatively higher level of cultural capital.

The three Netmums users I spoke to described their practices of using Netmums as involving the seeking of information about specific practical parenting issues. In this sense less exclusive commitment to the practice of using a particular website was seen than in the case of Mumsnet. In further contrast to Mumsnet use, Netmums use was framed as a complement to real world support rather than an alternative to it or escape from it. Netmums use was also seen to be an aid to real-world social networking with other mothers, thus that website supported assimilation with, rather than isolation from, canonical maternal practices.

Among the users of the two websites that I spoke to Mumsnet use was seen to involve a more definable set of practices, both in terms of competences and knowledge, as well as shared meanings framed as particular to Mumsnet. In breaking down the use of the two websites into Shove et al.'s (2012) suggested three elements - materials, competences

and meanings, I found that there was considerably more data on competences and meanings than on 'materials'. This was largely due to my research not focusing on the technological hardware of website use. The only data of note on the material element was that technologies both shaped the practice of using parenting websites itself – e.g. a smart phone screen favouring topics previously viewed and limiting subsequent choice – and the ways in which other parenting practices connected to it, for example, breastfeeding while using Netmums, watching sports day whilst browsing Mumsnet on a smart phone.

The type of engagement with the websites was indicative of the level of competence required to use the websites. The three Netmums users, who used the forum primarily to seek information and / or to complement face-to-face social networking, did not describe assimilating and developing distinctive knowledge about how to use the website and understanding of idiosyncratic codes. On the other hand, there was rich data from all three Mumsnet users indicating that competence in knowing when to post and what and how much to say when you did, and the development of the ability to debate and argue without taking criticism personally, was requisite for fulfilling use of the Mumsnet forum. In this sense being successful in using Mumsnet can be seen to involve the assimilation and understanding of a particular code of communication.

### ***Anonymity***

The key affordance of parenting forums dominant in my data was the relative anonymity they offered, though different meanings were constructed for it. The two Mumsnetters who posted regularly, and one of the Netmums users, framed anonymity as the most innovative and attractive aspect of using parenting forums. The two Netmums users described the facelessness of online communication as prohibitive to opening up emotionally, showing greater commitment to synchronous telephonic and face-to-face sociality, which they understood their online practices to complement rather than substitute. Anonymity was extolled by the two posting Mumsnetters as the unique selling point of that website in

particular, both fundamental to honest communication and contributory to a greater sense of community, drawing them into becoming committed carriers of the practice. The practice of name-changing on Mumsnet was especially prized by them and described as aiding the maintenance of online anonymity, with Netmums' system of automatically allocating first names and numbers to its members singled out by the Mumsnet users I spoke to as problematic and inferior. Thus the practice of using Mumsnet was positioned as requiring particular nuanced competences and rhetorical skills that rendered it more distinctively meaningful than other popular online parenting forums and wider canonical parenting culture. It arguably follows that constructing Mumsnet use as entailing definitive and meaningful practices positions the website as powerful and a pioneer among parenting websites. This framing of Mumsnet as pioneering chimes with MacIntyre's account of practices as, involving

‘...standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice. ...We cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far.’  
(MacIntyre, 2013, p. 221).

It is arguable that as the pioneer among popular online parenting forums Mumsnet have set the tone which others have followed – this was also seen in Netmum's founder SR's claiming of their website's identity from its difference to the more influential Mumsnet.

#### **8.2.4: The transition to motherhood and the use of parenting websites**

In this part of the thesis I sought to examine how using the two websites connected with women's own experiences of motherhood. In particular, the transition to motherhood and the kinds of support they sought, the support they received (or not) and how they evaluated that support in relation to support provided by their own real life social networks.

Drawing on narrative data from interviews with mothers, the emphasis shifted from the practice of using parenting websites to the identities the individuals I interviewed constructed. Turning point narratives relating to parenting and using parenting websites recurred in my initial thematic review. Control was found to be a key construct in the Mumsnet and Netmums users' narratives – their different ways of relinquishing, retaining and reclaiming it through their experiences of motherhood and its impact on their other identities and life course careers.

It is noteworthy that the six mothers who volunteered to take part in interviews had either experienced motherhood as negative or had become mothers under unexpected or difficult conditions, and so should not be framed as representative cases (Flyvberg, 2006). Overall, while the women I interviewed all narrated their present lives as hopeful and livable, markedly different narratives were constructed depending on how meaningful being a mother was for the lives / identities they (had) desired. While my small sample size limits how much I can claim about general usage of the websites, the two websites appeared to offer differing positions in relation to canonical narratives and normative ideals of good parenting (mothering) to respective users I interviewed. Data from users of the two websites were congruent with the narratives of the founders. On the one hand, Netmums users' accepted identities that accorded with culturally dominant and accepted meanings of motherhood (from a 'western' perspective), while on the other Mumsnet users dis-identified and / or were ambivalent about perceived canonical narratives of parenting practices and all-encompassing mothering identities.

The two Netmums users' narratives analysed in depth in this phase told the transition to motherhood as a gainful experience that had given their lives greater meaning. Having experienced difficult life events prior to motherhood - one suffering the bereavement of her first husband, the other describing herself as being in a chaotic relationship after starting university, and then returning to her childhood home and becoming pregnant accidentally by somebody else and embarking on single parenthood. Lack of control and loss of individual identity was experienced by both these users as an unavoidable and unproblematic part of the all-encompassing project of motherhood. It is important to note here that some narratives, for example relating to bereavement, may often not be tellable or are left unsaid.

The two Mumsnetters' narratives analysed in depth differed starkly to those of the two Netmums users. While these Mumsnetters' life experiences contrasted – one was married to a successful academic with two children, and the other was a single mother to one child whose pregnancy had been unplanned - they both positioned themselves prior to becoming mothers as free agents in control of their own lives. Subsequently, they both described their experiences of the transition to motherhood as traumatic, and in each case the experience had seemingly contributed to them being diagnosed with depression. Notwithstanding the biological element of depression, at a psychosocial level their experiences of depression were framed as resulting from the loss of control they had felt upon becoming mothers, constructed by both as shockingly unexpected. Mumsnet was framed by each of these women as instrumental in their beginning to regain a sense of their identities other than being mothers. Rather than motherhood itself being framed as a resolution, as was the case with the two Netmums users, the two Mumsnetters framed early motherhood as a period in which they had sought escape. Constructing their experiences of this time as so unremittingly negative rendered these Mumsnetters' present lives deeply meaningful to them now, their recognition of their experiences through using Mumsnet being framed as redemptive.



The sense of recognition and belonging found on Mumsnet by these two Mumsnetters suggests that, for them, the website embodied a complex of distinctive discursive social practices and identities. These discursive practices and identities reflected wider narratives they identified with - relating to cultural distinction and social class in particular. It has been suggested by previous research that Mumsnet is distinctive amongst online parenting forums in focusing on entertainment and offering women a space to perform 'alternative femininities' (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013). This was supported and extended in my study in that all three Mumsnetters performed non-maternal identities, both through the Mumsnet forum and in the interview encounter. My research supports this argument as Mumsnet was positioned as a space where the normatively unsayable (Elliott, 2011) could be openly expressed and debated. In enabling the admission of maternal ambivalence, Mumsnet can be seen to operate as a therapeutic space. Mumsnet arguably enabled these women, whether through anonymous acknowledgment / validation, actively sharing or recognizing their feelings in the experiences of others via lurking, to accept their ambivalence, allowing it to co-exist with their individual selfhood and to create more livable lives. Clearly, Mumsnet serves as an empowering therapeutic space for many mothers. However, an important question remains regarding whether it is a space that is made discursively available to all mothers, or whether it serves to intensify and reproduce unevenly distributed privilege through an exclusive language. Indeed, two concepts central to this thesis – i) canonical narratives, and ii) motherhood and social class - can be seen to converge at the site of Mumsnet. Rather than being framed as a shameful narrative that cannot be spoken, for the Mumsnetters in this study maternal ambivalence arguably became a canonical narrative of motherhood itself, the telling of which – both anonymously on the website and in the interview encounter - empowered them.

### **8.3: Methodological issues:**

I encountered several methodological issues during the undertaking of this study. In this section I detail what these were at each phase of the study.

#### **8.3.1: The challenge of building theories on multimodal approaches:**

Because the digital world is increasingly incorporating modes other than the written word, the image in particular taking centre-stage, the analysis of the websites as multimodal spaces was an appropriate starting point for my project. Furthermore, as my thesis is epistemologically founded on the notion of 'multiple standpoints', my use of multimodal discourse analysis should be understood as one analytical lens and data source among others. However, analyzing the websites multimodally and extrapolating to what they 'say' about parenting discourses proved distinctly challenging. A particular limitation of my multimodal analysis was that, whilst I discussed and analysed work in progress in a range of forums, which improved reliability somewhat, I conducted the analysis alone, and so my interpretation of the dominant discourses on the websites should be interpreted in light of the contextual information that I present. If I were to employ multimodal discourse analysis of websites again, one way to build on the work I have done could be to engage an interpretive community (Luttrell, 2010) of both researchers and potential users of the websites to produce a broader interpretive visual analysis.

My approach to multimodal discourse analysis drew on the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2010; 2006) and theories of social semiotics. However, I found some troubling contradictions to applying multimodality in practice. Specifically, there seemed to be an over-reliance on interpretive hunches in analysis that was contrarily coupled with pre-fixed notions of perception and a model of culture as a universally observable and readable text. For example, the notion that the affordances of discreet

semiotic modes come prior to perception rather than through the action / interpretation of a perceiver in a situated context (Pink, 2011). So, whilst multimodality was an appropriate approach to start my journey through the websites, in this form it seemingly takes little account of psychosocial understandings in interpretation. This limitation led me to embrace a more narrative approach to explore the meanings of the websites' constructions and their psychosocial significance in greater depth.

### **8.3.2: Issues around interviewing founding managers.**

The purpose of interviewing the founding managers of the websites was to continue exploring them as discursive environments. I wanted to ask the managers about the websites' origins, to understand why they were set up and in whose interests.

However, this approach was not without its problems. The first issue is that these narratives were elicited in interviews, so rather than occurring spontaneously or naturalistically, they should be viewed as accounts. The founder-managers' formal powerful roles at their websites is important to emphasise here, both in the context of their relative power to me in the interview encounter and how their positions informed the construction of their narratives. Two key limitations to interviewing the managers were that they were both busy people and in the public eye. Their busyness meant that face-to-face interviews were not possible and also that time constraints became an issue. In the case of JR, our telephone interview was limited at the outset to twenty minutes. The knowledge of having a time limit within which to get through all the topics I wanted to discuss with JR restricted the time I felt I had to probe for more detail. Furthermore, the need to move through the interview quickly allowed me less opportunity to challenge the narratives JR constructed, and thus made it easier for her to remain in control of the conversation and stay 'on message'. SR placed less rigid time constraints on the telephone interview and this perhaps lent it a freer, more rambling style.

At the level of cultural verisimilitude, that is, remaining true to one's given role / identity, interviews were an appropriate method to elicit data

relating to canonical narratives of parenting and social support. As stated, the managers told narratives consistent with dominant themes in the multimodal narrative analysis – JR reiterating a tragi-comic, apparently personal story consistent with that featured on Mumsnet’s ‘About us’ page and SR focusing on the local and framing Netmums as the conduit through which face-to-face social support arises, drawing on her personal experiences with PND. At the level of eliciting personal narratives, the approach I took here is arguably more problematic in that both JR and SR remained ‘on message’ and veered little, if at all, from the official stories of their websites’ origins featured on their ‘About us’ pages. On the other hand, I was interested in *how* narratives are constructed, for example the deployment of narrative devices such as emplotment, verisimilitude and intertextual links with canonical accounts, as much as *what* they contain.

Furthermore, alternative approaches were limited to me once I had sought access through them to researching the websites. With the benefit of hindsight, other ways to have explored the websites’ origins and the interests of those who set them up could have been to analyse documents in the public domain such as interviews in the media and posts made by the managers on the websites.

### **8.3.3: Issues of finding and observing users of the websites**

Both Mumsnet and Netmums are now saturated forums for researchers to find potential participants. In addition to this, the vast majority of research projects seeking recruits on these forums were requesting users to fill out online surveys with emphasis placed on their brevity and often offering small financial incentives. I was asking potential participants for considerable amounts of their time - two loosely structured long form interviews and also permission to observe their posts on the forums. There was some skepticism regarding the aims and purposes of my research, from potential Mumsnet recruits in particular. There was a limit to the detail I could give prior to carrying out my research. In addition, those who came forward to take part and remained in my study were

those who had a story they wanted to tell; certainly the six participants who took part in the face to face interviews bears this out.

It must be noted that much sociological research using internet forums is carried out on the forums themselves and that, as my research progressed, I made the choice not to analyse participants' posts on the forums. This was in part an ethical decision as my study involved eliciting in-depth narrative data from interviews conducted with users outside the context of the forum, including some sensitive topics. For me to have combined analysis of these women's posts with this interview data would arguably have compromised their informed consent regarding the continued anonymity and confidentiality of data used in my study, and potentially made them more identifiable on the forums. One Mumsnet user, Louise, had already expressed her wish that I did not observe her forum posts for this reason and as my research went on I increasingly came to share her view. If I had drawn on observations of other participants' posts but not her's my analysis would have been inconsistent. I would also argue that my predominant focus on participants' own narrative constructions of their use of the websites in the context of motherhood meant that the observational aspect of my original design became increasingly superfluous.

### ***Why (only) Mumsnet and Netmums?***

It is important to acknowledge that a plethora of parenting websites are not covered in this study and, while the decision to focus on Mumsnet and Netmums was not arbitrary, there are other popular ones which might justifiably have been included. Having said this, in light of the three-phase design of the research and in-depth narrative analysis of cases, time and financial constraints would not have allowed me to include many more cases. While more cases might have led to an increase in the breadth of the study I would argue that this would have been at the expense of its depth.

The focus on only two forums, Mumsnet and Netmums, was decided upon because they were the two most popular UK-based

parenting websites and a key interest was in popular discourses of parenting and how these play out online. I would argue, along with prominent theorists (e.g. Hardyment, 2007) therefore that these websites were most canonical of popular online parenting support during that period (2012-2016). The Netmums' founders being awarded OBEs and Mumsnet founders named in the BBC women's hour power list 2014 supports my argument for these websites as the most high profile.

My decision to recruit users of those particular web forums via the websites themselves could also be argued to imply an overly simplistic view of them as mutually exclusive online environments. Indeed, as discussed earlier in the thesis, the majority of my sample, while expressing a preference for one of the two websites, had used both at different times (as well as other parenting forums). The danger of reifying particular forms of internet technology has been usefully flagged up by Davis (2011), and might plausibly be extended to the potential reification in arbitrarily focusing only on particular websites as I did. Although, I would argue that my analysis of narratives of internet use in the context of everyday motherhood and collecting narrative data via interviews goes some way to warding off an over-determination of the effects of any one feature of the internet over another.

### ***Fathers***

It was unfortunate that the fathers I initially recruited did not remain in the study. While this limits what I can conclude empirically about gendered practices of using parenting forums, it also has sociological implications – namely that, as per previous research (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Rashley, 2005; Shirani et al., 2012; Elliott et al., 2014), highly gendered perceptions of parenting identities and practices as the domain and 'work' of mothers still persist. Having a sample exclusively of mothers meant I had no basis for comparison of online gendered practices in greater depth. While the issue of how to encourage male users of websites to take part in the study would require

attention and time for successful recruitment, it is a difficulty that has featured prevalently in previous research into parenting websites (e.g. Sarkadi & Bremberg (2005).

It has been noted that as all my participants were white British, heterosexual and predominantly middle-class, whiteness and heterosexuality were likely to have been 'invisible' to them and so not discussed in the interviews. It follows that as I am a white, middle-class father researching motherhood, my own identity is likely to have been less visible to me also. Furthermore, the characteristics that my participants and I assumed we shared – ethnicity, social class and heterosexuality – may have led to an unspoken co-construction of meaning according to dominant western discourses in interview encounters. Whilst this makes my work methodologically interesting, in an interpretive psychosocial study such as this it must also be taken into account as a limitation. Despite my reflexive relationship to my topic, how my own experiences of parenting may have been and continue to be refracted through my gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and social class, must be noted.

### ***Retrospective application of social practice theory***

It must be flagged up here that I applied social practice theory to my data at the point of analysis. This perspective was not well known to me at the time I developed my interview questions. At the time of interview my priority was to elicit narrative accounts by maintaining a loose structure to my interview schedule, as far as possible allowing my participants to lead the conversation. Through the analysis of twelve interviews, three key sensitising concepts were dominant and honed for further in-depth narrative analysis: the ways in which the women positioned themselves in relation to canonical narratives of parenting/mothering; how their use of the websites was framed in the context of their narratives of becoming and being mothers; and their understanding of their use of online parenting forums as an everyday social practice. In light of the last of these three main themes, social practice theory was retrospectively applied and so

questions I might have asked relating specifically to key elements of their practices were not asked. Also, the practices of using the websites were not observed. Furthermore, what conclusions I have drawn regarding the use of online parenting forums as a social practice that has indeed become routine for many parents (mothers) may only pertain to these six users who may not be typical in this respect. If I conducted the study again, I could spend longer developing interview questions to elicit data about the practice of using the websites and longer observing the practice. Also, a method might be developed to track participants' practices of using the websites, perhaps asking them to keep a record of it or request their consent to be tracked using a tracking application. Although, of course the aim of observing their forum activity was to record the pattern of the practice, and in light of respondents' feedback this was deemed to be ethically questionable in the context of this study.

### ***The limitations of narrative***

It must be pointed out that narratives, like all accounts, are partial (Phoenix & Brannen, 2014), and analysis of them is interpretive. While what the narrators in my study have chosen to speak and write about may be telling, it is equally telling what I, as researcher, found interesting about particular cases. In other words, the data has also been shaped by the questions that I asked according to my research interest, so these narrative accounts are co-constructions. The fact that narratives are co-constructed makes the social and historical context in which they are produced central, and it also follows that narrative talk depends on having an audience – they are a form of performed social action in research encounters (Atkinson, 2005) in which the interviewer may serve as a social medium or catalyst (Brannen, 2013). The notion of performativity and necessity of having and keeping an audience engaged is an important consideration in light of the two forms of interviewing I conducted in my research – one where I was temporally and spatially co-present and one where I was not.



The methodological focus of my study is narrative but not all my data had the same narrative quality – i.e. some accounts had a clearer temporal structure and demonstrated considerable performativity, while others were more fragmentary accounts. Overall, there was a notable difference between the narrative quality of email interview data and that of face-to-face interviews. Two of the three Mumsnetters (Rachel and Louise) produced data with narrative quality over email as well as face-to-face – seemingly adopting both the virtual and actual space as a platform for constructing and performing stories. However, three of the other participants' email interviews displayed little narrative quality in their brevity, and one of my participants (Helen) did not complete her email interview.

The lack of narrative quality to those three cases in email interviews was at least partly due to the fact there was no co-present audience, the questions being sent in emails and responded to as and when participants were able. Indeed, it is notable that those participants who expressed that online forum use did not provide an emotional connection and was too faceless were also those whose email interviews had a less narrative quality, despite being prompted in each email I sent to 'tell me more' etc. Furthermore, those participants whose email interviews had a narrative quality were those who spoke about online parenting forums as spaces where they could communicate honestly and with no expectation of reciprocity; because of its anonymity, the online context was perhaps a space where they felt they could express themselves freely. To be more specific, it was the *performative* quality of these two Mumsnetters' interviews that stood out; there was little distinction between their email and face-to-face interviews in that regard. It should also be noted that the participant whose data was most markedly performative in quality (Mumsnetter Rachel) responded to my emails very soon after receiving each one, writing to me that if she did not do this she knew she would not get around to it. This suggests that the sense of a proximal audience may be important in gathering narrative data online.

If I carry out further narrative research using online interviews I would consider using an application that would enable temporally

synchronous communication. Setting up online focus group interviews would be another way to explore how narrative is constructed online with an audience of more than one. Of course it should be borne in mind that a methodological aim of the present study was to explore the usefulness of different interview modes (online and face-to-face) in collecting narrative data, so the methods employed here were appropriate.

#### **8.4: Conclusion**

This thesis makes a distinctive contribution to knowledge in this field. In particular, in taking account of different levels of narrative – the discursive aspects drawn out through visual analysis, the narratives of those who founded two particularly popular parenting websites of this epoch, and micro-level in-depth accounts of a small sample of those who use the websites – this study charts new territory. A notable methodological contribution is made in its application of narrative, multimodal analysis, and social practice theory to online data.

The relative positioning of motherhood visually on the websites – the child and mother being omnipresent on Netmums, and Mumsnet placing emphasis on mothers as individual women as well as mothers – was reflected in the managers' acceptance and rejection of canonical narratives of motherhood. Furthermore, the managers' relative positionings of themselves and their websites to wider parenting culture through their narratives bore a striking relationship to the respective users I interviewed from each website, most markedly the Mumsnet users. This was especially evident in the mothers' acceptance or dis-identification with normative canonical narratives of mothering – Mumsnetters echoing and perhaps identifying with co-founder JR's aspirational narrative of simultaneous parenting and career success. Indeed, constructing their early experiences of motherhood as negative, a situation perhaps validated through medical diagnoses of post-natal-depression, arguably enabled Mumsnet users to redeem their selfhood, their lives becoming more meaningful in the present. In this sense the individual takes precedence over mothering identity, so, according to Ricoeur's (1992)

concept of narrative identity, selfhood is foregrounded – this primacy afforded the individual is consistent through each stage of my analysis and supports previous research that Mumsnet is distinct from other parenting websites (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013). Although overall the data from Netmums users had a less narrative quality, especially in being less performative, there were still links between their narratives and that of manager SR. In particular, SR's story of her own isolation through post-natal-depression in early motherhood and users' framing of motherhood as a positive change that unquestionably formed the core of their identities now, and indeed in two of them was framed as their redemption from previous struggles. In terms of Ricoeur's (1992) concept of narrative identity it can be argued that, in each phase of my analysis, Netmums, its manager and the users I spoke to, foregrounded sameness in their narrative identity.

The open display of maternal ambivalence and rejection of canonical narratives of mothering in interviews with Mumsnetters supports Thomson et al.'s (2011) argument that there has been a recent contemporary shift from mere technical engagement with expert advice towards mothers using such forums to position and construct their identities in relation to maternal culture. Connected to this, the Mumsnetters in my study positioning themselves in opposition to canonical narratives of mothering and social support also echoes Pederson and Smithson's (2013) argument that Mumsnet in particular provides a new form of online space for mothers to express alternative perspectives previously associated with male internet users. Indeed, the Mumsnetters I interviewed explicitly celebrated in that website's distinctiveness from other parenting websites, telling me their discovery of it was revelatory and framing Netmums in particular as anathema to them. Further to this, I have argued that maternal ambivalence was itself constructed by the Mumsnetters I interviewed as a canonical narrative of motherhood that served to empower them in opposition to perceived disempowering canonical narratives of parenting – for example, the inevitable all-encompassing nature of motherhood that was embraced by Netmums users I spoke to.

My study backs up previous research finding that using the websites was a support for the mothers in feeling that they were not alone (Sullivan, 2008; Morris & Bertram, 2013). Equally, my finding that two of the Netmums users experienced the lack of face-to-face contact online as negative also backs up previous studies (Coulson & Greenwood, 2012). The Mumsnetters in my study expressing anonymity and the ability to change their username as the defining feature in enabling honest discussion of sensitive topics in online parent support is congruent with previous studies findings that anonymity and the affordance of 'lurking' were prized (Johnson, 2015; Niela-Vilen et al., 2014; Brady & Guerin, 2010; Kouri et al., 2006; Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). Indeed, the Mumsnetters in my study's apparent blanket rejection of face-to-face support groups and preference for the anonymity of Mumsnet supports research by Madge and O'Connor (2006) who found that some found temporary relief from the power dynamics of new motherhood and potential transcendence of local moralities of motherhood on the website 'Babyworld'. My study – the Mumsnetters' narratives in particular again – also supports previous work suggesting that mothers feel they can safely test out and legitimate new identities online, especially in the transition to motherhood (Johnson, 2015; Madge & O'Connor, 2006). While it needs to be researched in greater depth, the implication that successful and fulfilling use of Mumsnet involves the assimilation of particular codes and so may reproduce unevenly distributed privilege relating to social class echoes previous findings that there was a degree of hegemonic continuity with 'real-life' traditional family structures online (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Pedersen & Smithson, 2010). My study extends Vincent and Ball's (2007) work on classed parenting practices in suggesting the transmission of discourses of distinction and cultural capital into the practice of using popular parenting websites – specifically Mumsnet. My examination of the use of these two parenting forums as a new social practice, particularly the apparent expectation to gain knowledge of and assimilate codes around the practice of posting on Mumsnet supports Alstam's (2013) work. Alstam (2013) suggested that a level of rhetorical competence is required to post successfully on Swedish

website 'The Parent Place', and therefore may preclude some from feeling they belong there. In researching both Mumsnet and Netmums I was able to get at and confirm (among those I interviewed) Pedersen and Smithson's (2013) suggestion that Mumsnet users are especially critical of Netmums as an inferior space representative for Mumsnetters of a less truthful variety of online support than that found on Mumsnet.

The possibility that Mumsnet in particular could be a generative space for the assembling of a collectively conscious maternal public where dominant discourses of good mothering might be challenged has been considered in recent research (Johnson, 2015; Jensen, 2013). Two of the Mumsnetters in my sample constructed their discovery of Mumsnet as a revelation in the midst of difficult transitions to motherhood. They framed the website as redeeming their sense of selfhood they thought lost on becoming mothers, and helping them to forge and validate more livable identities as mothers. The unrivalled support these women expressed they found on Mumsnet supports previous work addressing how the website has a particular therapeutic capacity due to encouraging users to express their feelings 'publically' in anonymity on the forum (Gambles, 2010). However, the lack of obligation to be reciprocal in online support was framed as a helpful feature of the website by Mumsnetters in my study. This chimes with another argument Gambles (2010) puts forth that Mumsnet tends to frame issues in individualistic terms and erase any more collective sense of the social and political. All the Mumsnetters I interviewed constructed face-to-face socialising with others on the basis of being parents as negative. This rejection of forging bonds with other parents may point to a privileging of individualising parenting practices and identities that risks undermining genuinely inclusive collective parenting identities. Furthermore, the absence of racialized discourses and general lack of discussion of sexuality, social class and ethnicity in each phase of my research points to an assumption of whiteness, middle-classness and heteronormativity at the levels of visual design, founding stories and user narratives of these popular UK websites. While I remain cautious of making any broad claims due to my small sample size, this

suggests that these spaces likely do not fully reflect the diversity of their users.

Whilst I did not interview fathers in this study, visual, textual and verbal data from the two websites at each phase of analysis was consonant with research suggesting the notion that 'parenting' is synonymous with 'mothering' is culturally embedded (Edwards & Gillies, 2011; Shirani et al., 2012). Furthermore, the lack of commitment displayed by fathers I initially recruited may indicate a persistence of gendered norms of parenting identities and practices.

In seeking to understand how mothers incorporate digital forms of knowledge and support into their lives, this study stands at the interface of several worlds. Homing in on the two leading popular UK-based parenting websites of this epoch as I did contributes to the historical orientation (Mills, 2000) of my research, offering nuance and time specificity to the use of popular parenting forums as a new practice that is contextually useful for future research in this area. One example of this usefulness is the illumination of different meanings attributed to online and face-to-face social support in my data at the time that the research was conducted. The immediacy and anonymity of the web was framed as favourable to gaining emotional support by some while others found it faceless and used it for informational support only. Furthermore, the relatively greater narrative quality of data from face-to-face interviews in my study raises implications for peoples' increasing engagement with writing online. In particular, whether the immediacy of the web for all its convenience may also risk narrower, more prescribed ways of experiencing life and relating (or not relating) to others. For example, the comparative lack of narrative performativity in online interviews may denote less opportunity to contemplate experiences of time beyond the present, fostering disinclination to imagine creating changes in the future. This is especially relevant in light of recent political events (e.g. the Brexit vote in UK and the election of Donald Trump in the USA), where, for all their powers of connectivity, the tendency for online social networks to increasingly serve as echo-chambers has been highlighted by some commentators as responsible for limiting awareness and knowledge of life experiences and

understandings beyond those who share one's own (Daykin, 2016). Additionally, the individualising nature of online communication in what has been popularly dubbed 'the age of loneliness' (Bourne, 2016; Turkle, 2012) may lead to a sense of increasing disconnection from shared experiences involving family and community existing beyond the present.

In applying social practice theory to the use of specific popular parenting websites this study makes an important contribution to the development of in-depth qualitative studies of online parenting forums. Carrying out interviews I was able to access those who lurked and rarely post on parenting websites, which is also a key contribution of mine. Focusing on two websites in particular this study furthers recent theories postulated by Pedersen and Smithson (2013) about Mumsnet. Indeed, including Netmums enabled comparative analysis between two popular spaces. Furthermore, my interviewing of the founders of the websites and multimodal discourse and narrative analysis of their visual architecture enabled in-depth exploration of the discursive formations of the websites. In carrying out narrative analysis on a small number of in-depth interviews with respective users my study makes an important contribution to filling a previously identified gap in the literature (Niela-Vilen et al., 2014; Danebak & Plantin, 2008) in exploring the experiences and understandings of parents who use online support in everyday non-clinical settings.

### **8.5. Future directions**

A fruitful direction for future research would be to apply social practice theory to the use of parenting websites as the main focus, with a larger, more diverse sample of participants who might use a broader range of websites. The in-depth narrative oriented work carried out here might be complemented by carrying out a follow-up study of practices of using parenting forums deploying a mixed methods approach – for example observational analysis could be carried out on key forum pages, focusing solely on messages posted rather than the individual identities of those who post them.

While my thesis somewhat serendipitously ‘got at’ the practice of lurking due to my predominant method being interviews outside the context of the web forums, as it is seemingly such a predominant online practice it would be fruitful for future work to explore lurking in greater depth with larger samples.

This study did garner some data on the material aspects of the practice of using online parenting forums – i.e. the different devices used and how it shaped the practice, but it was minimal and not the main focus. A fruitful direction for future research would be to apply this aspect of social practice theory more explicitly at the stage of data collection, perhaps comparing posts on mobile devices with those from computers.

All of my sample were individuals who had babies or young children, ranging in number, gender and age. A direction for future research would be to take into account these factors while recruiting for the study, rather than recruiting an opportunity sample as I did. This would be interesting in relation to exploring how parents’ practice of using parenting websites may change as their children develop.

In light of recent work on Mumsnet by Pedersen and Smithson (2013) there is a need to explore the notion of ‘alternative femininities’ and whether that particular website affords women a space to enact online practices previously more associated with male internet users. One way of examining ‘alternative femininities’ in greater depth would be a comparative analysis of the practices of male and female users of these websites.

Another future direction for research on popular UK-based parenting websites would be to foreground the exploration of positionings relating to nationality, ethnicity, racialisation. While research questions were included on this topic, after the initial multimodal discourse analysis my study did not explore this in-depth as my sample all identified as the unmarked category of white British, so this issue was not discussed. It would be fruitful to explore this theme both from the perspective of the websites as discursive environments and the experiences and practices of users identifying as ethnicities other than white British. Another important future direction to explore through narrative approaches would be the role



of online parenting support in relation to migration and the everyday practices and identities of those who have experienced it.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Ethical approval letter from Institute of Education**

**Ms Pui Sin**  
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Dean of Faculty: Professor Richard Andrews

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**By Email**  
Jolyon (Joe) Winter  
41 George Street  
Cambridge  
CB4 1AL

7 November 2012

Dear Joe

#### **Ethics approval**

**Project title: Constructions of parenting and social support; narratives of parenting identities and practices in online and face-to-face contexts**

I am pleased to formally confirm that ethics approval has been granted by the Institute of Education for the above research project. This approval is effective from 7 November 2012.

I wish you every success with this project.

Yours sincerely

**Pui**

+++++

Pui Sin  
Research Student Administrator  
On behalf of the Faculty of Children & Learning Research Ethics Committee

cc: Julia Brannen  
Ann Phoenix  
IOE Research Ethics office



## Appendix 2: Letter from Supervisor



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To whom it may concern

### **Narratives of mothering and fathering in online and face-to-face support contexts**

We are happy to recommend to you our doctoral student, Joe Winter. He is a PhD. Candidate at Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, under the supervision of Professor Ann Phoenix and Professor Julia Brannen. The working title of his project is 'Narratives of mothering and fathering in online and face-to-face support contexts'. Ethical approval has been granted by the Institute of Education for Joe to conduct this project. Data collected by Joe will be used primarily for the purposes of his Ph.D. In order for the data from the project to be used for purposes other than the Ph.D., all necessary permissions will need to be sought before doing so.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Julia Brannen'.

Professor Julia Brannen

## **Appendix 3: Questions sent ahead over email to manager of Mumsnet**

Narratives of parenting online and face-to-face

Joe Winter

- Can you tell me the story of how Mumsnet came into being?
  - What messages does the website want to communicate about being a parent?
  - What are the main things people use the website for?
  - How would you say the forum compares with other parenting advice / support such as at a children's centre or from a health visitor?
  - How does Mumsnet compare with other websites / forums for parents?
  - Can you tell me how it came to be called Mumsnet?
  - Who designed the Mumsnet logo? What were the ideas behind it?
  - Can you tell me how Mumsnet is funded?
  - Who owns Mumsnet? Which companies are the main sponsors?
  - Have you used Mumsnet as a parent?
    - If so for what kinds of issues?
  - Have you any idea to which groups of parents the site appeals?  
For example, age of their children, social economic status, ethnicities
-

## **Appendix 4: Follow-up questions sent by email to manager of Netmums**

1. How does the story of Netmums compare with your own story as a parent?
2. When you explained the role of the forum on Netmums you emphasised that it was important it was supportive and that you therefore 'moderated it very hard'. You suggested it was not a place for debating issues where people hold passionate views, using abortion as an example of such an issue. How are different views represented on Netmums?
3. You mentioned that 'We've had about eight dads over the years complain to us and we've suggested that they help us write more for Dads but none of them have ever done that'. Why do you think this was?
4. You said '(we've) been quite anti-corporate throughout our history in terms of the way we try to do things'. Could you tell me more about this?
5. Are there any brands Netmums has preferred not to work with? If so, can you tell me about this?
6. You talked about how Netmums has had to change and move with the times, saying 'that sort of idea of Netmums being a membership organisation has sort of drifted a bit over time because the world has changed so much in recent years but nevertheless that's still the sort of feeling that we have about what we do'. Can you say more about what you mean by this?
7. When you explained how support works on the website you described the parent supporters responding to posts 'alongside other peers' and that 'it's all quite hidden'. By this I understood that there are occasions when supporters will direct support at users without them necessarily asking for it directly. Is this the case?
8. If so, do you think this affects the environment of trust built up on the Netmums forum in any way?
9. You said that 'the only reason Netmums is successful is we are bottom-up' whereas, when you started out, other 'really big websites were all top down'. Could you say more about what you mean by this and why you think this is the case?
10. How do you think the government-funded support that is in part based around particular targets sits with the bottom-up structure?
11. You spoke about the Netmums model as being 'to get support and understanding from your peers but also to get a bit of a professional view'. I wonder if you can say more about this.
12. You mentioned that 'we've got evidence to say it's saving the tax payer money because we get fewer contacts, there's quite a large number of avoidable contacts where people go to their GP or health visitor when they don't need to'. Could you tell me more about the nature of this evidence?
13. Can you tell me how the forum came to be called 'The Coffee House'?
14. You said previously that 'roughly a third of our groups have a household income of less than £25000, which is different for mothers for example on Mumsnet'. You went on to say that Netmums and Mumsnet have 'different target audiences'. Can you tell me more about your target audience?

15. Was this Netmums' target audience from the beginning?
16. You said that you and your co-founder 'had suffered with PND'. How does your own personal story and experience relate to this target audience?
17. When asked about the ethnic diversity of Netmums you said that it is 'an area where I am more disappointed that we've not been able to reach out to as much'. What do you think are the reasons for this?
18. Do you think Netmums' users are aware of the heavy moderation on the forum?
19. Do you think they know that the website is partially funded through a government scheme?
20. If yes, what else do they know?
21. You said that you do not use Netmums' forum yourself for support as 'it would be difficult running a service and using it' but that 'there are occasions when I felt I could've used it because all of us have difficulties with our families from time to time'. Could you tell me more about what kinds of issues you think you would use it for if you did?

## **Appendix 5: Information sheet for participants**

### **Narratives of mothering and fathering online and face-to-face**

#### **Who am I?**

I am a Ph.D student at the Institute of Education in London. My research involves parents' engagement with Mumsnet. I am a parent to young children myself and have worked for several years in parent and family support services.

#### **Why am I interested in speaking to parents on parenting websites?**

I am interested in finding out how online social and information networks relate to mothers' and fathers' everyday experiences of being parents. I am a student who is interested in different forms of support for parents – especially online support. None of your information or posts will be used for any purpose other than to support my Ph.D work and names will all be anonymised.

I want to listen to Mumsnet users' experiences of being parents – to your stories.

#### **What am I asking you to do?**

The project is planned in three phases:

1. Observation of your engagement with the forum as a participant myself.
2. At some point I would like to ask you if I may conduct an interview with you using email.
3. If you are willing I would also, at a later point, like to conduct a face-to-face interview with you. If not I am happy to do it on the phone or online.

There is no obligation to take part in any of these if you do not want to.

#### **What happens to the information you provide?**

In my research your name will be changed and your forum posts anonymised, so that you cannot be identified.

#### **Who is doing the work?**

##### **Joe Winter**

If you would like to take part please let me know through Mumsnet via a 1-1 message (username JoeWinter1978) or by sending an email to [j.winter@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:j.winter@ioe.ac.uk)



Thank you for taking the time to read this.

I hope to hear from you soon.

## **Appendix 6: Participant Email interview questions and survey**

Email interview questions sent to Rachel (Mumsnet user)– sent 12.48pm 5<sup>th</sup> June 2013

Hi Rachel,

That's great. Thank you and many thanks for responding to my initial post on Mumsnet. I wouldn't envisage this interview taking until September, but please do take as much time as you feel you need to write as much as you can during the interview. From my perspective there is no immediate rush to get your answers so please respond at your own convenience, also feel free to ask any questions along the way.

I must also reiterate that your responses will not be shared for any other purpose than to support my PhD work and that your name and details will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified.

My PhD project explores social support and narratives of mothering and fathering online and face-to-face. I am interested in your use as a parent of parenting forums, as well as internet practices more generally. Thank you for your previous description of your internet use to my initial question, if you are able to describe how and where you are accessing the internet each time you respond during the interview that would be really helpful.

Each time I get responses from you I will reply with some further questions. The reason for not sending all the questions in one go is that I am interested in hearing about your own experiences so the questions are not all fixed beforehand. I also don't want to overload you with lots of questions all at once.

Below are the first questions for you to answer in your own time. Please take as much time as you need and write as much as you can.

- Have you accessed any parenting forums in the past 7 days?
- As a parent, were there any particular things you were looking for / support you were seeking from the forum?
- What stages/ ages are your children now? (e.g. new born, pre-school, primary school age...)
- In what ways has / have the forum(s) been helpful
- Have they been unhelpful in any ways?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Many thanks,

Joe

--

Jolyon Winter

.....

Parenting forums research - Survey

As part of my research I would like to ask you some background factual information about yourself and your family and household. It will help me to understand where you are coming from.

How old are you?

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-30
- ☐ 31-36
- ☐ 37-45
- ☐ 46-50
- ☐ 50-60
- ☐ Over 60

How would you describe your ethnicity?

What is your country of birth?

What is your sexual orientation?

- ☐ Heterosexual
- ☐ Homosexual
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What is your current marital status (tick all that apply)?

- ☐ Single
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Separated / divorced
- ☐ Co-habiting

Who lives in your household?

What is your household income before tax?

- ☐ £0 – 20000 per year
- ☐ 20000 – 25 000 per year
- ☐ 25000 – 30000 per year
- ☐ 30000 – 35000 per year
- ☐ 35000 – 40000 per year
- ☐ 40000 – 45000 per year
- ☐ 45000 – 50000 per year
- ☐ 50000 – 60000 per year
- ☐ 60000- 70000 per year
- ☐ 70000 – 85000 per year
- ☐ 85000 – 100000 per year
- ☐ Over 100000 per year

What language(s) are spoken in your home?

What is your employment status?

- ☐ Full-time over 40 hours
- ☐ Full-time 30-39 hours
- ☐ Part-time more than 16 hours
- ☐ Part-time 0-16 hours
- ☐ Self employed
- ☐ Not in employment
- ☐ Sick / on disability
- ☐ Unemployed



Are you in receipt of any benefits?

If so, which ones?

---

What is your housing type?

- ☐ Owner occupied
- ☐ Local authority
- ☐ Housing association
- ☐ Privately rented
- ☐ Other (please state)

How many rooms are there in your house (not counting kitchen and bathrooms)?

---

Do all your children live with you?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

What are the ages and sexes of each of your children (specify whether biological / non-biological)?

If No, why not (for example left home)?

If No, where and who do they live with?

---

***Thank you for your participation!***

## **Appendix 7: Participant Face-to-Face interview schedule**

- 1a. Can you tell me (in as much detail as possible) about the last **24 HOURS** of your life as a parent / mother / father?  
**wait for them to stop – check they have finished**
- 1b. Follow up / PROBE after they have finished narrating –.  
[follow up in terms of detail and time periods, following order of narrative]  
e.g. In what ways is that TYPICAL? Is there a typical day?
  
- 2a. Can you tell me how living where you do affects your everyday life as a parent?  
**wait for them to stop – check they have finished.**
- 2b. Follow up. / probe – e.g. access to support you need? – relationship between geographical area and use of online forums?
  
- 3a. Tell me about your (everyday?) life before you were a parent?  
**wait for them to stop – check they have finished.**
- 3b. PROBES: What was life like before you were a parent?
  
- 4a. Can you tell me about what kind of support you need in your everyday life as a parent?  
**wait for them to stop – check they have finished.**
- 4b. Follow up – probes: offline as well as online
  
- 5a. Can you tell me about how you get (the) support (you need) as a parent?  
**wait for them to stop – check they have finished.**
- 5b. Follow up – probe: offline as well as (online)
  
- 6a. Can you tell me (in as much detail as possible) about a time when you have sought support as a parent offline?  
**wait for them to stop – check they have finished.**
- 6b. Follow up – probe PROBES – How is that supportive? / In what ways is that supportive? (using their words).
  
- 7a. Can you tell me about your experiences of being parented?  
**wait for them to stop – check they have finished.**
- 7b. Follow up PROBE – What has changed since then?

## **Appendix 8: Pen portraits of participants**

### **Rachel**

Rachel is 31, married and has two children – a daughter aged eight years and a son aged three. Her husband is an academic who spends a third of the year away due to his job, as her own father did when she was growing up. During the course of the two interviews Rachel told me that she had never wanted to have children, it was husband who had initially. She suffered with both antenatal and postnatal depression around the birth of her daughter and described finding Mumsnet as a ‘revelation’ as it was both somewhere where there were other parents (mothers) who felt the way she did about the struggles / dislike of being a mother and somewhere where she was able to freely express these feelings. Although Rachel has used and been a member of several other online parenting forums, including Netmums, Bounty and Baby Centre, she much prefers Mumsnet and told me she has been on it everyday since she heard about it on the Bounty forum during her first pregnancy. She describes herself as a lurker who can be tempted out to post on threads on interesting subjects, although she has posted on numerous threads she has only started a small number. Rachel has had several usernames and keeps a stock of them ready so she can ‘namechange’ whenever she feels the need. During the course of my study she changed her screen-name once and informed me at the final face-to-face interview at her home that she had changed her screen-name again – the implication being that now the research was over she wanted to regain her totally anonymous status on the forum. The anonymity afforded by Mumsnet in particular was highly prized by Rachel and understood as fundamentally important to the kind of online parenting support she wants, allowing her the freedom to say whatever she feels like saying at any time, within the light-touch moderation of the Mumsnet community, and for it not to leave a lasting impression of her identity on those who read it.

Rachel described herself as an introvert who enjoys solitude and finds friendship making difficult. She dislikes being part of a recognizable community in the real world and feels she has little in common with other mothers where she lives. She compared the cultural expectations and etiquette entailed in face-to-face sociality unfavourably with the greater freedom of expression afforded by the anonymity of online communication. While Rachel has taken up opportunities for parenting support in the ‘real world’, such as Homestart through her health visitor, she described almost all of these experiences as negative. She does not believe that there is very much support for parents in the real world. Rachel singled out her experiences of having counseling for her anxiety disorder / depression as a positive experience of real world support.

### **Louise**

Louise is a 37-year-old single mother and lives in a privately rented flat with her two and a half year old son who has recently started attending nursery three and a half days a week. Louise does not work but is a full-time student having recently started a degree in social work.

Prior to becoming pregnant accidentally she worked in the dance music industry, spending half the year in Ibiza and half in London. She told me in both our email and face-to-face interviews that she found the transition from ‘party girl to motherhood’ very hard – she was under the psychiatric ante-natal team after 32 weeks of her pregnancy and described the support she got from her mental health midwife as ‘amazing’. The change in lifestyle that accompanied having a child came as a surprise to Louise, her plan during her pregnancy was to continue working freelance, but after taking her baby to a business meeting it became clear to her that her work and mothering identities were not compatible. Louise described feeling ‘cut off dead’ by people she had been working with for fifteen years. She had to sell her flat and move out of London, deciding to live near to her mother who helped her with childcare. Louise told me that she had probably had really bad postnatal depression also but it was not until a year after her son’s birth that she sought help through counseling. She said this support ‘helped a lot’ but that it took another year until she felt like herself again. When we met face-to-face Louise told me that her counselor helped her understand that she did not have to ‘wear a mum uniform’ and that her identity as a person/individual could co-exist with being a mother.

Louise started using Mumsnet when she was pregnant, posting on the 'relationships' board about the situation she was in regarding the father of her baby not wanting to be very involved. She said that the advice she received was very matter-of-fact and that, although it was not easy to take on board whilst she was pregnant and confused about the impending birth, with the benefit of hindsight it was useful advice. Louise told me when we met face-to-face that having been through the experience of becoming a single mother she now tries to reply to posts from mothers-to-be on the forum to share her experiences with others. She told me that she is still on Mumsnet most days although she does not always post and the boards she frequents have changed since her son was a baby, for example she used to use the 'behavior and development' section but now rarely does. Louise said she often posts on boards that are not related to parenting, such as the exercise support threads. Being able to remain anonymous on the forum and change her screen name whenever she chooses is Mumsnet's big selling point for her. The importance of remaining anonymous on Mumsnet to Louise was exemplified by her not granting me permission to observe her forum posts, as she felt that she would then no longer be anonymous. Louise told me that the anonymity afforded those who post on Mumsnet is important as it enables people to be 'honest about their problems and receive genuine advice from others who have been in similar situations then I feel this gives a sense of community'. Louise singled out one topic on Mumsnet – 'has having children affected your mental health?' as helping her recognize that her experiences 'of boredom, regret, loss of identity, frustration, depression were not isolated'. Louise wrote to me that she thinks everybody should be forced to read this thread before deciding to have children. Although she does not regret having her son now, she told me that she never wanted to have children and the process of accepting her identity as a mother has been slow and hard.

During the course of the first email interview Louise moved back to London as she had found living outside London 'very hard and lonely', writing that she 'didn't meet a single person on (her) wavelength the whole time I was there'. We met to conduct the face-to-face interview three months after this and she was in good spirits, telling me that now that she is living back in London she feels much better. Towards the end of the interview Louise told me that although she still does not feel she shares much in common with other parents in this area of London it affects her less than it did when she lived elsewhere as she can see the house she lived in when she was two from her current home and so feels that this is where she belongs. Louise's mother brought her up by herself and she described how she left her with a series of young nannies from a young age, telling me that she was commuting on the train to primary school and cooking her own dinner aged ten. Such experiences, described by Louise as 'benign neglect' and more common in the 1970s, have informed her current parenting practices which can be seen to both challenge and reproduce her own mother's practices as well as a contemporarily dominant canonical narrative of child-centred parenting practices – e.g. she will not allow her son to go to soft play centres as he picks up illnesses there, while elsewhere she spoke about the intensity of their one-to-one relationship (describing her son as having some mature ideas for his age as he lives in an adult-centred rather than a child-centred house).

## **Donna**

Donna is in her mid thirties, white British and lives with her husband and four year old son in an owned house. She works full-time managing a clothes store in a shopping centre and her husband works as a stores manager for a petroleum company. Their household income is between fifty and sixty thousand pounds per year.

Their son has attended nursery three days a week since he was four months old, apart from a brief period when she went part-time at work and he reduced his hours to two days per week. Donna told me that she considers nursery to be beneficial for little babies, expressing that she felt it was better for him to start there early before he became too attached to her which is when the majority of babies start and proves to be a painful process for both parents and children. Donna always knew she was going to go back to work full-time early and believes that this was good for her. Her mother takes care of their son every Tuesday and she told me they had managed to persuade her husband's parents to 'take him on' every Thursday.

Donna described herself as somebody who does not forward plan her life, but rather 'goes with the flow', telling me that having a child was not something she had always desired but something that she and her husband decided to do as they had reached that point in life. Their son's arrival was framed as not causing a notable rupture in their life as their circumstances and practices had already shifted to those more suited to becoming parents – e.g. Living close to a good infants school, not going out as much socially. Her brother died eight years ago and Donna told me this led to a shift in dynamics in her wider family that may have contributed to their decision to try for a baby. Donna expressed that if it had not been understood beforehand that she and her husband would share caring evenly then she would not have had a child. She also told me that when she was on maternity leave she did the majority of the caregiving, such as nappy changing, even when her husband was present simply because she had become quicker and more efficient at it as she was doing it all day. She explained that her understanding is that women who take on a more protracted "stay at home mother" role often end up continuing to carry out the majority of these practices primarily because it has become more habitual for them, so they do it more efficiently than their partners.

Although Donna and her husband explored the possibility of antenatal classes during her pregnancy, including NCT, they opted not to do them. The local antenatal classes would have required her to take time off work and she could not see the point in spending money on NCT classes in order to form a new social group when she would be returning to work full-time after four months. When I asked if she attends – or had attended – any parenting groups Donna was unequivocal in her response initially, openly questioning why she would want to when she may not have anything in common with those in attendance other than that they had a child of the same age. Immediately after this she did backtrack saying 'I know they're fine really' and 'I'm sure they're lovely and people must make really good friends' but that they are 'not for me'. Donna told me in both the email and face-to-face interviews that she thinks she is –and always has been – 'really unmaternal' and that being able to read about others' experiences on parenting websites (namely Mumsnet and American website Berkley Parents Network) helped her feel reassured and to build her confidence when she first had a baby. While she told me that she is not a prolific poster on Mumsnet, reading far more than she posts, she did tell me about her first post on the forum which was a response to somebody who had posted about having sleep difficulties related to breastfeeding. Donna felt prompted to respond as she had recently had the same problem and had drawn on advice given in the popular parenting book 'The Baby Whisperer' about trying to feed for longer before letting your baby fall asleep. The 'damn snotty reply' she got from one Mumsnetter questioning her passing on of this advice upset her and discouraged her from posting again for some time. Donna told me that her support needs have changed now that her son is able to vocalize what his needs are and that she no longer accesses so much support on Mumsnet directly involving parenting, but uses it more now as a substitute for socializing. She also told me that she finds the more intellectual areas of the forum such as the feminist boards stimulating and that she reads and posts on employment support. In the email interview Donna wrote that she has had a history of depression and anxiety since she was first at university and expanded on this when we met face-to-face, speaking about it openly. Notably she told me that she had a minor relapse early on in her son's life, saying 'it wasn't sort of some deep horrible dark place, just not quite 100% either'. Whilst she did describe the '...dropping off and going to work and being at work all day and then picking up...' of parenthood as monotonous, this episode of mild depression was framed as being related to boredom at work 'nothing like post-natal-depression'. Although she was prescribed antidepressants, which helped, she said that things got significantly better when she got a new area manager at work 'who got me doing some different things'.

Donna described her upbringing as 'normal' and that, whereas she can see that her father made some conscious changes between the strict manner in which he was brought up and how he chose to parent her and her brother, she has not felt the need to make such changes. Singling out the good work ethic that her parents passed onto her Donna told me that 'you know they've always done what they can for us so I s'pose I take that with me... you just always do what you can for your children'.

## **Emily**

Emily (25) is a single mother with a five-year-old daughter who attends the local primary school. She works full-time in the service sector, claiming working tax credit, child tax credit and child benefit. Emily's daughter lives with her and she does not have a relationship with her birth father, but has formed a bond with Emily's ex partner which Emily expressed - in our face-to-face interview - she feels is important to maintain. Emily was also brought up in a single-parent family, her father leaving soon after she was born and having no contact until she telephoned him when she was sixteen. Aged 21 Emily received a letter from her half-sister through which she learnt she has two half-sisters. Although they have not met, Emily told me that they get on well and are now in regular contact through Facebook and that she will get round to meeting them soon. Emily told me that she met her father for the first time when her daughter was five months old and she was 21. In the face-to-face interview she described this meeting as 'weird' but that 'she can't be bothered with feeling bitter' about this situation and is 'not losing any sleep over it'.

Emily and her daughter relocated from living in the small coastal town where she spent her childhood and where her mother still lives to live with an ex-boyfriend of hers who she had kept in contact with using MSN instant messenger and who had been to visit a few times and got to know her daughter. This relationship has since ended for the second time and Emily and her daughter have moved to the other side of town, which she told me in the face-to-face interview is not a nice place to live. Emily explained to me that she had no choice but to move there as she cannot afford for them to live in the nicer part of the town. Emily also told me that although she would love to move back to where she grew up to be near her mum but that she would hate it after four weeks as there is very little to do, she also feels strongly that this would not be fair on her daughter as she has now started school and she wants her to remain as settled as possible.

Emily does not believe there is any relationship between where she lives and her use of Netmums but told me that her position as a single mother brought her to the website. She discovered Netmums after she broke up with her ex boyfriend most recently when she googled 'single parent support'. She has only started one thread of her own on the Netmums forum - on the 'Meet-a-Mum' board - to see if there were any other mums who wanted to meet in her area. She has formed some relationships with other local mothers in her area through this message board. Emily has posted on the wider Netmums forum only very rarely but told me that she browses it for between 30 minutes and an hour a day. There are three boards in particular that Emily likes to follow: 'the serious stuff', 'having a bad day' and 'women's health'. If she is using her phone, which is usual, she tends to only read these three boards, but if she is reading Netmums on a bigger desktop computer she explained that it is easier to navigate to other areas of the website so she will then visit other boards on the forum, involving topics such as 'payday loans' and 'egg donation'. Emily also pointed out to me that the forums do not all centre around parenting. In the email interview Emily explained that on 'the serious stuff' thread 'people post a variety of things, like having trouble with ex partners, social services, serious health issues, relationship problems etc' and that she 'just likes looking through and reading what people are going through'. She expanded on this in our face-to-face interview, telling me that she enjoys browsing these particular threads as she enjoys seeing 'complete strangers just offering support to these people' and that 'it kind of restores your faith in humanity'. Emily told me that she would never get emotional support from Netmums herself as she would always telephone her mum for reassurance. She told me in both interviews that she views her habitual use of Netmums as an addiction and spoke about her use of the Internet in general as at times obsessional - particularly relating to health queries (I'm terrible for googling things'). Emily told me that she would always go to the facts first, for both women's and child's health questions, using the NHS website as an example, but that she values the experiences of others that websites like Netmums offer which is something she feels is perhaps lacking in professional healthcare support. She spoke openly about her recent experience of terminating a pregnancy and of how helpful it was to read others' experiences of the same procedure on Netmums in between taking the medication and waiting for it to take affect.

Emily spoke positively about what face-to-face support there is available and told me that she thinks things are easier for parents now than they were when her mother was bringing her up, and that there are welfare benefits that were not available to her mother if you are willing to work.

The face-to-face interview Emily and I conducted was the longest of all the cases in my study, lasting just over two hours. Conversely, in our email interview she generally gave short responses - when encouraged to expand in follow-up emails Emily frequently repeated what she had written previously. There was also a break in the email interview of around two-three months, it being completed just prior to our face-to-face meeting in early October 2013.

## **Nicola**

Nicola is in her mid 30s and is married with two daughters aged two years and eleven weeks. Head of biology at a secondary school prior to having children, she is now a part-time science teacher and was on maternity leave at the time of our interview. When we met face-to-face Nicola told me that going back to work is important to her as she sees it as 'me-time' in the sense that it is something she does not have to be a mum to do and that it challenges her. Nicola's husband is a web designer who works close enough to spend his lunch break at home most days. They live together with their two daughters in their own house.

Nicola has been previously married, being widowed at the age of thirty when her husband died suddenly of a heart condition. She and her first husband had talked about having children but had planned to a little later as they were focusing on their careers at that time. Nicola told me that after this happened she did not think she would ever have children, let alone meet somebody else. Two years later, after trying internet dating which she described as 'scary', Nicola was set up on a blind date with a friend of a work colleague. He was two years younger than her and they got on really well and both talked openly about wanting children at some point. They got married soon after the birth of their first daughter. When we met face-to-face Nicola told me, 'I always wanted to be a mum but I just never thought it was going to happen at one point so I'm incredibly lucky'.

After her first daughter was born a health visitor recommended Netmums to Nicola as somewhere to look for advice from other parents for getting babies to sleep. This led her to begin to use the internet more for parenting support, accessing websites through Google. The kind of support Nicola obtains online is practical (sleep advice, potty training) rather than emotional – she told me that she finds speaking face-to-face or over the phone better for emotional support, 'I don't feel I can express how I am feeling sufficiently by writing'. Although she does not use online resources for emotional support for herself, Nicola told me that she likes to be able to share some of the things she has gone through in the hope that it offers some support to others, citing her experience of having a miscarriage after the birth of her first daughter as an example. Nicola told me that she has read threads on Mumsnet, in particular on the subject of controlled crying, but she has never commented on them. She feels that Mumsnet is a less supportive environment than Netmums, which is different due to the focus there on everyday local support and meet-ups between other mothers. Nicola has met another mother who is around her age through the meet-a-mum board on Netmums who she describes as a good friend who she regularly texts.

Nicola told me that her husband is her main source of emotional support and that he is also a great help practically, for example he usually gets their older daughter ready in the mornings and drops her off at nursery. Nicola also spoke of how lucky they had been with their NCT group during her first pregnancy to meet five very like-minded other women who she continues to meet up with regularly. She told me that it was comparing notes with these NCT friends in a non-competitive way that led her to seek advice for her oldest daughter's sleep problems. Nicola told me that her parents visit most weeks to help out with childcare – taking her older daughter out so she can catch up with housework – and that they also receive frequent but less regular support from her husband's parents. During both interviews she mentioned her sister-in-law as a useful port-of-call for parenting advice as she has two daughters who are older than her two. Nicola's eldest daughter attends nursery three days a week, this is important to Nicola as

she believes it helps her daughter's social development. She also visits her local children's centre regularly telling me it is a great place to meet local mums and appreciating the opportunity it affords to chat informally with the health visitor at baby weigh-ins there. Nicola told me that her first port-of-call for parenting advice is the health visitor.

## **Helen**

Helen is 25 and has one baby daughter who is almost 12 months old. She lives with her partner in the house they own together. We had only one exchange over email before we met in person for the synchronous interview, so her email interview is incomplete. Helen is a trained social worker and works at a children's centre as a family support worker, her partner is the manager of two betting shops.

When Helen was pregnant she and her partner moved to a village outside the city where she grew up, as they were unable to afford to buy a house within the city. Whilst she displayed some ambivalence over this necessary move, telling me 'my support network has reduced in that my friends aren't as local', later in our interview she told me that now they have got to know their neighbours she likes the community feeling of being in a village. A key advantage she emphasized was that her Auntie (on her step mother's side) lives in the same village and is a registered child minder and so looks after her baby daughter while Helen is at work. During the interview Helen spoke several times about the pressure she feels there is on her to know what to do with her baby because knowledge of child development is at the foundation of her practice as a social worker. While saying that this pressure came from sources including her own family and families she works with, she also told me that she feels she puts undue pressure on herself to have this parenting knowledge. Helen went on to tell me that being a parent herself has led to her being able to empathise more with the families she works with who have difficulties.

Helen returned to work part-time when her daughter was eight months old, but told me that she felt that she should have stayed at home for a bit longer, understanding the reason for this to be that, although she does not agree with it, it is more socially acceptable for a mum to be the provider at home. Helen told me that when she first returned to work she felt guilty because she felt she should be at home looking after her daughter, saying that some of her newer friends' (who she met at baby groups) comments about how she would miss her daughter contributed to this feeling of guilt.

While she said she had 'a very happy childhood', Helen also told me that her parents split up when she was six years old because her mother (who she told me without prompting was from a family of Jehovah's witnesses) had an affair. She said that as a consequence of this her relationship with her mother has never been a close one and she gets on better with her father and her step mother, who she lived with from the age of six along with the eldest of her three younger siblings, the other two lived with their mother after an informal agreement between her parents. Helen explained that she felt more loved and accepted at her Dad's whereas at her Mum's she felt at times that 'I had to live up to something that I maybe didn't want to do'. She understood her experiences growing up as influencing her own parenting practices, telling me that her mum was quite strict and her dad was more laid back: 'I was kind of looking for a middle ground so I didn't really wanna be like (.) any of them/ sure/ I just wanted to do it my way/ yeah/ and I think that's pretty much what I've done - just what I think's best rather than what they tell me to do'.

Despite telling me she is still hanging on to her old social life, Helen seemed to have taken up a new parenting identity through her description of the shift in social practices that becoming a parent entails, 'my social life before was about – it was more like exploring the world more so and going out and now it's focused on going to baby groups'. Helen said that there are positive sides to becoming a parent, 'it's the next step to becoming a mature adult- I now hold a lot more responsibility which is nice in that we have our own home and like- we both- we have to pay the bills and stuff which isn't always nice but it's a good responsibility as an adult/ right/ and it teaches you life lessons so that's good'.



In terms of support, Helen told me 'I tend not to ask for support' and that rather than asking her parents, for example, she uses the internet as her first port of call, finding parenting advice and forums via Google. The parenting websites that Helen uses are Netmums and Bounty, she told me this is partly because often these are the ones that come up first when she searches for particular issues, but that she also likes Netmums as there is lots of information on there and the professionals on there mean it is 'a bit more reliable than just other peoples' opinions'. Helen singled out breastfeeding as something which had been very important to her and that she had difficulty with, initially suffering with mastitis. She described her parents and her in-laws as offering her conflicting advice that she did not find helpful and that communicating on the forums on Netmums was more supportive as 'I can tell them things and they don't actually know who I am'. Sharing her experiences and reading about other mothers' online led Helen to go to see the doctor and then a lactation consultant. Helen described this experience of using parenting forums as offering both informational and emotional support.

## Appendix 9: Sample analysis of an extract of data

The following extract comes from the email interview conducted with Mumsnet user Rachel, married with two children aged eight and three and aged 31 at time of interview (Pen Portrait Appendix 8). I wrote about this extract in Chapter 7.3 of the thesis. It was identified in my thematic review of Rachel's case data as speaking to my research interest in how parents position their parenting practices and construct identities in relation canonical narratives of 'good' parenting. Figure 8.1 shows an excerpt of transcript colour-coded to identify main themes (Chapter 3.4.3). Key themes were mapped in this way across all six cases which then formed the basis of overarching sensitizing concepts.

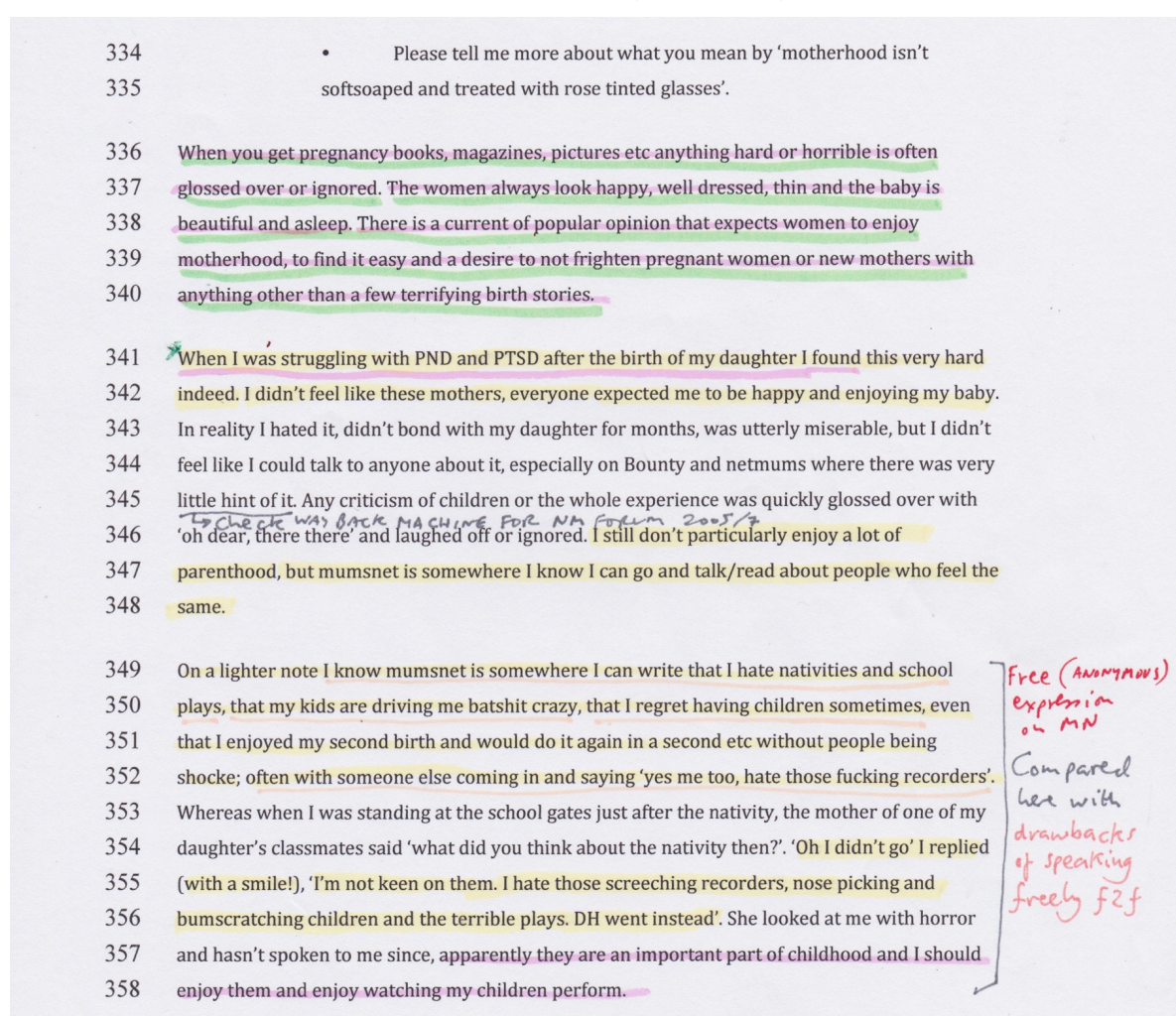


Figure A9.1 Excerpt of coded email interview 'transcript'

Codes:

Canonical narratives of parenting

Repositioning self to / reframing canonical narrative of parenting

Narrative interactions between participants and narrative(s) of the managers / wider website

**Normative discourses / Canonical narratives:** How far do participants' discussions on the web forums / in online interviews reflect normative discourses / canonical narratives of parenting?

How do these compare with normative parenting discourses / narratives of 'parenting' given online (via the websites Mumsnet and Netmums) and those present on the websites' homepages and interviews with managers?

**In what ways are online discussions of parenting gendered, racialised, classed etc?**

**Political** Nestle boycotter (255)

**Health** Anxiety disorder / depression (67-8; )

**Social (?) Comparison** (of websites 245-50; bounty 313-19; did not feel like these (Due-in forum) mothers 341-42; toddler groups 405-7; 612-13; netmums prescriptive re PND 623-33; MN people like her 646)

Class (education higher MN 109; textspeak 110; 'these women' 268; MN greater acceptance 302-3; swearing 458-61; bounty - incorrect parenting practices 468-71; netmums etiquette 478-9; netmums users 484-7; MN v NM 573-85; anti-textspeak not the norm 605-6; NM- 'those sites' as homogeneous mass 631-33; PO - small-minded provincial MN posters 767-69)

Lifestyle Nestle boycotter (255)

**Friendship** (no close friends 126; non-reciprocity favoured 155-64; 270-71; non-reciprocity in parent-child relationships 419; due-in forum temporary convenience 264-69; Primarily self-interested 197-98; frames support, friendliness as 'misplaced' 366-67; online-face-to-face meetings 384-85; shame. 479-81; Rachel limits support she on MN 491-92; *I'm not in the position to be a good friend right now* 646-49)

**Gender (mothering)** (DD boys clothes; 67; her mother non-emotional relationship 126-7; other forums - NM prescriptive / status quo notions of 'the maternal' 242-45; 248-49; 261; 456-7; 485-86; 'some women' re NM 623; softsoaping of motherhood in culture 336-40; felt other than this - PND 341-42; toddler groups - tired stressed women = cruelty 407-8)

**Unmaternal** (not enjoying parenthood 346-48; mocking of 'mummy' names on MN 728)

**Generational**

Her Parents (126-7)

In-laws (414; 419; 672-76)

Homestart support fixated on religion / non-christening (393-95)

5

**Parenting practices** (judged on MN 65; small story re tantrum - 'so many methods people seem to feel strongly about' 745-48)

**Mothering practices** (parents adhering to normative parenting practices on other forums via ads / status quo 242-50; mothers supposed to be nice 374; rose-tinted mother thing 406-7)

**Brand identity of website (Mumsnet discourse)** (wider culture softsoaping motherhood 111; 336-40; 406-7; witty, irreverent, clever 144-48; 322; other sites more gendered 242-44; 261; nestle boycotter 255; MN powerful 270-71; users = to owners 281; 283-4; 292-3; 521-2; fairness, open to all 517; 521; 528-9; proper language use 330; 612-13; experts / smart people shaping MN parenting 'rules' 464-67; MN status quo 474-76; MN typography, theatricality, humour 478; 506-7; 511-12; 535-39; 541 fearless re Gina Ford suit 547; Shame of using NM before 479-81; importance of MN username 729)

**Subversion / challenge to canonical narratives (of 'parenting' / sociality)** How do participants suggest they exercise agency as parents through their use of discussion forums?

(through parenting, everyday practices 67; 185-90; Due-in forum little in common 99-102; moved a lot 126; no close friends 126; not close to mother 126-7; schadenfreude re those who do not share her worldview 135-36; friendship making / face-to-face reciprocal sociality a negative 155-60; 270-71; of mothering 242-44; on other forums 247-50; 296-98; 790; formula fed 246; PND - not feeling like other mothers 341-42; as a MNER subverting canonical / solidarity 346-48; MN can vocalize negative/aggressive thoughts/feeling re parenting experiences 349-52; dislike of f2f groups 405-7; MN accepting of non-mainstream practices 475-6; NM users want to feel safe / unchallenged 484-7; not saving someone else's idea of what PND should be like 628-31)

Figure A9.2 Excerpt of cover sheet for Rachel's email interview



The next phase of analysis involved analyzing transcripts again along 'directions' suggested by sensitizing concepts. I produced cover sheets of each case to record this process and keep abreast of my data set (Figure 8.2).

Line by line narrative analysis was then conducted along three dimensions found to be salient across the cases:

- i) The ways in which the women positioned themselves in relation to canonical narratives of parenting/mothering,
- ii) How their use of the websites was framed in the context of their narratives of becoming and being mothers.
- iii) Their understanding of their use of online parenting forums as an everyday practice.

Narrative analysis was conducted on the above extract (Figure 8.1) to consider the 'canonical narratives' contained within it, and how Rachel positioned herself as in opposition to or reframed these in relation to her everyday life.

***Canonical narratives in this extract:***

**Cultural expectation to enjoy motherhood and be naturally content / 'good' at it**

'...a current of popular opinion that expects women to enjoy motherhood, to find it easy.'

'everyone expected me to be happy and enjoying my baby'.

'...apparently they are an important part of childhood and I should enjoy them and enjoy watching my children perform'.

Rachel constructs a 'rose-tinted' canonical narrative which equates women's enjoyment of motherhood with being 'good' at it. She distances herself from this through her use of the indefinite pronoun 'you'. Her repeated use of the word 'expects', 'expectation', as well as employing the word 'should', embeds her framing of this as a canonical (culturally expected) narrative. By deploying the extreme case formulations, 'everyone', 'always', Rachel sets the scene for her own story which runs counter to what is culturally expected.

## **To get on and make the best of it / Depression and struggle as unspeakable**

‘In reality I hated it, didn’t bond with my daughter for months, was utterly miserable, but I didn’t feel like I could talk to anyone about it, especially on Bounty and Netmums where there was very little hint of it. Any criticism of children or the whole experience was quickly glossed over with ‘oh dear, there there’ and laughed off or ignored’.

The ‘reality’ of Rachel’s depression is contrasted sharply with the canonical narrative of how she was ‘supposed to feel’. Another canonical narrative of depression being unspeakable is drawn on here also. Popular websites for parents other than Mumsnet are also aligned with the ‘rose-tinted’ canonical narrative of mothering. Rachel’s description of any criticism being ‘quickly glossed over’, ‘laughed off or ignored’ speaks to a canonical narrative of making the best of things and not dwelling on difficulties, as well as framing mothers as being patronised.

### **‘School gates’ and ‘nativity’ as key sites of the performance of expected ‘good’ parenting practices**

The presentation of the email Rachel sent back to me was noteworthy in being set out in sections. By introducing the last section, ‘on a lighter note...’ she is setting the scene for a humorous story, although it ends up being at the expense of another mother at the school gates, who signifies the previously constructed ‘rose-tinted’ canonical narrative of ‘good’ parenting. The school gates and the nativity are important here as key canonical sites where ‘good’ parenting is performed.

### ***Repositioning canonical narratives:***

#### **Experience of depression as alienating her from wider parenting culture**

‘When I was struggling with PND [Post Natal Depression] and PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] after the birth of my daughter I found this very hard indeed.’

‘I didn’t feel like these mothers, everyone expected me to be happy and enjoying my baby. In reality I hated it, didn’t bond with my daughter for months, was utterly miserable’,

Rachel switches to the first person, therefore positioning herself as in opposition to the canonical narrative of contented mothering that she has set up. By separating the two sections in her email Rachel narratively constructs different types of discourse – the macro level of wider culture, then the micro level of her

own personal experience which ran counter to that. Her illness serves as a powerful signifier for her feeling of alienation and the disconnect between her own personal experience and this wider canonical narrative.

### **Identifying with Mumsnet as somewhere she could be / express herself**

‘I still don’t particularly enjoy a lot of parenthood, but Mumsnet is somewhere I know I can go and talk/read about people who feel the same.’

‘...even that I enjoyed my second birth and would do it again in a second etc without people being shocked; often with someone else coming in and saying “yes me too, hate those fucking recorders’.

By setting the scene of canonically ‘good’ parenting with such culturally embedded sites as the school gates and the nativity, Rachel further dramatises her total rejection of them. Her use of swear words and ‘hate’ firmly position her narrative identity as running counter to the culturally expected narrative of ‘good’ mothering.

### **Mumsnet offering counter to canonical narrative of ‘good’ parenting being all-consuming / where the unspeakable can be spoken**

‘Mumsnet is somewhere I can write that I hate nativities and school plays, that my kids are driving me batshit crazy, that I regret having children sometimes...’

‘Whereas when I was standing at the school gates...’

‘She looked at me with horror and hasn’t spoken to me since, apparently they are an important part of childhood and I should enjoy them and enjoy watching my children perform’.

‘...especially on Bounty and Netmums where there was very little hint of it’.

Mumsnet is set up as a counter to the canonical narrative of having to enjoy parenthood and Rachel strongly identifies herself with this. The other mother at the school gates can be seen as emblematic of the previously constructed ‘rose-tinted’ canonical narrative of ‘good’ parenting. Her horrified reaction strongly positions Mumsnet, and Rachel as a dedicated user of the website, as exceptional to the canonical.