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Digital mothering: Sharenting, family selfies and online affective-discursive practices

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Digital Mothering: Sharenting, family selfies and online affective-discursive practices

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Abstract

Posting about one's children and family has become a routine practice for mothers on social media. The task of presenting oneself as a 'good' mother is subject to the trouble of competing requirements around motherhood (e.g. neoliberal intensive mothering, feminine relationality) as well as family ideals which are unrealistic for many. These troubles are further complicated by sharenting discourses in which parental posting is seen as digital narcissism. This study examines mothers' identity work in their talk about posting family photos to social media. Twenty mothers aged between 24 and 50 were interviewed using their family photo posts as interview stimulus. Using a feminist poststructuralist framework, the data were discursively analysed, paying attention to how identity trouble was produced and repaired in three constructions of mothers' photo sharing which included: emotionally connected mothers; digitally relational mothers; and proud mothers. In these constructions, family photo posts were constituted as a selective process which performed relational work to rhetorically manage the networked audience by deflecting conflict. This included the digital repair of offline troubled identities to present oneself as 'good' whilst avoiding class-based

othering. How these findings offer a challenge to predominant problematisations of digital mothers is discussed.

Introduction

The increased accessibility and affordances of smartphones as networked devices has enabled a proliferation of photo sharing practices. These practices include those around family photography which, up until the rise in digital technologies, had relatively circumscribed display, primarily in home. It is now the case that parental photo sharing of children and family is a recognisable theme on social networking sites such as Facebook (Lazard et al., 2019). While fathers and mothers take photos, traditional practices of family photo curation have largely fallen under the responsibilities associated with motherhood (Durrant et al., 2009; Rose, 2010; Janning & Scalise, 2015). These gendered patterns have extended into social media practices with mothers posting information about their children, particularly family photos, with greater frequency than fathers (Ammari, et al., 2015). Given these gendered patterns, this paper explores how mothers talk about posting about their children and family to social media. In doing so, it explores the literature on mothering and parental pride in relation to online sharing of family images and how these play into neoliberal imperatives around femininities. It draws on interview data to examine how these phenomena become relevant to mothers' identity work in and through their talk about their online practices.

Since parental, particularly maternal, online sharing has emerged relatively recently as an everyday practice for many, sustained empirical scholarship on the topic is in its infancy. To date, research has explored the impact of parental sharing with respect to children's online safety (e.g. Marasli, et al. 2016), maternal mental health (e.g. McDaniel, et al. 2012) and transition to parenthood (e.g. Bartholomew, et al. 2012). There has been some engagement with family photos online, focusing on how families are represented in posted public images

(e.g. Le Moignan et al. 2017). Across this literature on digital parenting, there has been an overwhelming focus on first-time parents, antenatal preparation and parents with young infants. The focus on first-time and early years parenting appears related to how parental sharing increases in frequency with the arrival of a baby but reduces as children grow older (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015).

Research on the parental sharing about older children and young people has begun to grow due to concerns with the negative implications of the practice in relation to children's rights, privacy and risk (e.g. Archer, 2019; Lipu & Siibak, 2019; Verswijvel, et al. 2019). The problematisation of parental posting to social media is also captured in the popular and pejorative term 'sharenting' which describes oversharing about one's children and family on social networking sites (SNS) (Blum-Ross & Livingston, 2017). That parental sharing is both a common and contested practice suggests that mothers who post family photos potentially face a number of tensions and complexities in presenting themselves as 'good' mothers on social media.

Sharenting criticism is connected, in some respects, to wider problematisations of family photography. Both on and offline, family photography visually represents everyday aspects of family life as well as developmental milestones of children (Hallman & Benbow, 2007; Janning & Scalise, 2015). The selective representation of the family as 'happy' defines the content of family albums in which family members, relationships and experiences are constituted at their best (Frolich & Sarvas, 2011; Ammari et al. 2015). This versioning of the family has been located within Eurocentric and classed social aspirations of 'good' family life and critiqued for effectively erasing an array of difficulties. For example, economic downturns, domestic hardship and the everyday difficulties of doing mothering are predominantly absent in family photography (Pasternak, 2014). Social conventions for family photos have also produced a high degree of uniformity across family albums. This uniformity

has underpinned understandings of family photo practices as banal and repetitive in both scholarly and popular arenas (Rose, 2010; Goc, 2014). These characterisations resonate with descriptions of sharenting which has been described in various media commentaries as mundane and annoying for the viewing audience (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

The negative connotations with the term 'sharenting' have drawn attention to normative parameters of social acceptability around parental posting. This is particularly relevant to mothers given that they share this type of content more often than men and as such are the primary focus of disapproval (Lazard, et al., 2019). It is not just the frequency of posts that appear to stand as violations of normative standards of acceptability. The ways in which 'sharenting' can be understood as humblebragging has also been heavily criticised in the popular press (Lazard et al., 2019). The humblebrag has been defined by the Oxford English dictionary (n.d.) as:

> An ostensibly modest or self-deprecating statement whose actual purpose is to draw attention to something of which one is proud.

This definition is coupled with the following example:

> social media status updates are basically selfies, humblebrags, and rants

The negative portrayal of humblebragging and pride in this example stands in tension with how pride is an affectivity long associated with 'good' parenting. For instance, parental pride has been used in assessments of family functioning and is used as an indicator of high-quality family environments on which good developmental outcomes depend (Bradley, et al. 2001; Berk, 2013). The theorisation of parental pride in psychology has been subsumed within broader considerations of pride as an emotion. In this body of work, pride has been treated as dual faceted, comprising of authentic and hubristic features (Tracey & Robins, 2007). Authentic pride is concerned with achievement and associated with positive feelings of self-

worth and self-esteem, while hubristic pride is associated with narcissism (Tracy et al. 2009). These understandings of pride appear relevant to 'good' parenting discourses as well to sharenting as a form of digital narcissism (e.g. Blum-Ross & Livingston, 2017).

Tensions between the requirement for displays of parental pride and sharenting discourses become particularly complex for feminine and maternal subjectivities. More specifically, sharenting as a form of digital narcissism, with its associations with grandiosity and self-absorption, is dominantly positioned as distinct from relationality which defines normative 'good' femininities and 'good' mothering (Lazard & Capdevila, 2021). In the context of neoliberalism, the relational feminine subject is also expected to be individually responsible for their own personal achievement and growth. As such women are also required to be 'self-managing, autonomous and enterprising" (Gill & Schaff, 2011, p. 5). However, in relation to parenting, individual responsibility is transformed, particularly for mothers. As Johnson (2014) notes, mothers as primary care givers become responsible for both self and children. As such, individual responsibility becomes a "responsibilisation of the self-for-others" (Johnson, 2014, p. 332). This form of responsibilisation is an easy fit with intensive mothering ideals, first described by Hays (1996), which amplify social expectations of mothers to undertake an inordinate amount of labour (emotional, practical and financial) to not only guarantee that their children thrive but also to enhance their performance in relation to their peers. The element of competition embedded within intensive mothering discourses has been explored in McRobbie's (2015) theorisation of the notion of "the perfect" as "a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the [middle class] 'good life'" (p. 9). 'The perfect' is interwoven in neoliberalism's achievement-focused competitive individualism and, concomitantly, in new and reformed pressures that women and young girls face around, for example, self-disciplined body management, success at work and, importantly here, in family life. However, engagement with competitive individualism

for women is far from straightforward because 'good' femininities are characterised by non-competitive, supportive relationality (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). This is exemplified by the social censure of sharenting where maternal humblebrag can be viewed as a signal of rivalry between mothers.

In line with the classed constitution of 'good' femininities under neoliberalism, intensive mothering ideals are imbued with white middle class aspirations of what it means to 'properly' parent (Hays, 1996). With the normalisation of intensive mothering, its ideals have increasingly cut across social class and ethnicities, particularly but not exclusively, in western contexts (e.g. Le-Phuong et al. 2017). As such, mothers, regardless of their intersectional positionings, are expected to raise their children in line with white middle class values in order to be able to claim a 'good' mother identity (Budds et al. 2017). Mothers whose positionings deviate from such ideals may have particular trouble in aligning themselves with current standards which constitute 'good' mothering identities. Taylor (2005) suggests that an identity becomes troubled when it is negatively valued or rendered questionable by others because, for example, it conflicts with other identities claimed. With the now routine and expected practice of displaying family in social media postings, deviations from ideals of mothering and family forms may be more visible which may produce opportunities for identity trouble. For example, the display of family is now open to a wider audience since online accounts often comprise a more or less heterogeneous network of relationships (Miguel, 2018). On some platforms, such as Facebook, online audiences often have offline relationships with users which presents opportunities for comparison between what is posted and what is known about the user's offline life. The affordances of social media platforms allow for more frequent and rapid dissemination of pictures with the option of brief accompanying commentaries as well as inbuilt facilities for audience response. These affordances provide opportunities for a steady stream of posts which can construct an

ongoing narrative of family life on mothers' SNS profiles. This narrative of family life takes shape in the context of women's individual identity projects on social networking sites. In this sense, maternal subjectivities are rendered highly visible and foregrounded. (e.g. Larsen & Sandbye, 2013). Thus, the potential for identity trouble may well be enhanced.

Situated within a feminist poststructuralist framework, the current study extends the discussion of current scholarship by moving discussion away from the prioritisation of the ethical dilemmas parental posting poses for children. Instead, this empirical study examines mothers' identity work in their talk about posting family photos to social networking sites. In doing so, it explores how mothers negotiate parameters of social acceptability around the display of mothering and family on social media.

Method

Data Corpus and Collection

Twenty mothers aged between 24 to 50 participated in digitally recorded semi structured interviews, lasting between 45-90 minutes, following approval from the University's Research Ethics Board. Participant recruitment initially involved making contact with professionals working for UK family-based charities in the East Midlands. An information sheet about the aims of the study were emailed to these professionals which stated that the study was interested in exploring the views and experiences of mothers who have posted about their children and family on social media. The information was disseminated by these professionals to mothers via their professional and personal networks. Mothers were also recruited via snowball sampling through the researcher's existing offline networks who were primarily located in the UK midlands and south.

Criteria for participation was based on mothers having experience of posting material about their children on social networking sites. The age of children was not set as a criterion

for exclusion from the sample. This provided the opportunity to explore potential diversity around relational considerations that frame mothers' identity work. In this study children's ages ranged from 1 to 26 years: nine children were under 5 years of age, nineteen children were aged between 5 and 12 years, six were aged between 13 and 19, and five of the mothers' children were aged between 20 and 26 years. The number of children mothers had varied from one to five. The majority of mothers in this sample (11 in total) had two children.

There was some variation in the demographics and life circumstances of the mothers who participated. Eighteen of the mothers were currently married, of which three described themselves as stepmothers and one as separated from the father of her children. Two participants described themselves as lone mothers. Of those that answered the question about employment outside the home, twelve were either in full or part-time employment and two described themselves as stay-at-home mothers. One mother indicated that her partner worked from home which allowed him to do a significant proportion of childcare. The majority of mothers described themselves as British, one as Australian and two had migrated to the UK from Zimbabwe and Nigeria respectively.

Interviews

Prior to interview, participants were asked to identify 3 to 5 posts they had shared to a social networking site that were related to their identity as a mother. The study did not specify the content of posts in that they could be photographic, text only or both. There was no requirement that posts be directly personal; posts featuring, for example, inspirational quotes, cartoons and other publicly shared material could be used by participants during the interview. However, the majority of posts shared by participants in the interviews were photos of their children alone or with the participant and other family members. It should also be noted that the study did not specify which social networking sites should be the focus of

the interview. In this data set, interview discussions were based on participants' Facebook posts.

The interviews took place in a venue chosen by the participants, which was typically their home or workplace. Participants were briefed to ensure they understood the aims of the study and their ethical rights. They were then invited to sign a consent form and fill in a brief demographic information sheet. The interview began with a broad question about the participant's general experience of becoming a mother before moving on to discuss posts which participants showed to the interviewer on their smartphones (Lazard, 2017; Capdevila & Lazard, 2021). During the discussions of posts, participants were asked about the general context of the post, why they had posted it, how they felt about the post and what the post captured about their experiences of their family and motherhood. Participants were also asked about their understandings of other mothers' posts that they had seen on SNSs.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim using simple transcription derived from Jefferson conventions to convey contextual information including emphasis in italics, untimed pauses in single closed brackets ( ) paralinguistic features in double brackets such as ((laughter)) as well as punctuation to enhance readability (Jefferson, 2004). The data were initially thematically analysed with attention paid to relevant discursive features around the constitution of identity, family and posting. Three initial themes were identified which were: 1. Familial togetherness, 2. Familial happiness and, 3. Maternal pride. The themes of familial togetherness and happiness reflect two longstanding conventions for producing family photos (Rose, 2010). The theme around the display of maternal pride in family photos has been explored less explicitly in the family photography literature. These themes provided the basis for further analysis using a feminist poststructuralist discursive framework. The analysis focused primarily on the construction of gendered subjectivities and the implications that these have for agentic and power positionings (Johnson, 2018). This involved an examination

of the mobilization of particular constructions of mothers' photo sharing online, how these linked with wider discourses and what subject positions became available within these. The notion of troubled subject positions was used to make sense of gendered positionings in this data. Discursive features of trouble, as mentioned earlier, refers to inconsistencies, including negative positionings, that conflict with the constitution of positive identities in talk. This is often managed by attempts at repairing the troubled identity (Taylor, 2005; Taylor & Littleton, 2006). The analysis thus focused on what identity trouble was produced by the display of photos on social media and how this was addressed by mothers using discursive features of repair.

Analysis

In their talk about posting family photos to social media, mothers signalled potential identity trouble through the ways in which their maternal identities could be located outside of idealised family forms and 'good' mothering discourses. Mothers' online engagements were also subject to the trouble of negative audience reaction to posted photos (e.g. sharenting criticism). The analysis suggested that mothers attempted to repair troubled identities in highly complex ways through the selection of their posted photos. These selections work with conventions for producing family photos (e.g. familial togetherness, happiness), constructions of 'good' mothering (e.g. intensive mothering) and engagements with their digital audience (e.g. relational and caring). In this data set, repair was attempted through these constructions of posting, in which participants were discursively positioned as:

- Emotionally connected mothers
- Digitally relational mothers
- Proud mothers

Emotionally connected Mothers

Many of the posted photos that mothers shared in the interviews were characterised by familial togetherness. This can be seen in the following extracts, where mothers discussed posted photos of family outings or holidays:

> *Faye: It's nice to be able to capture some like family time, like proper family time together*

> *Carol: we are not anywhere glamorous particularly, we are in Dorset, and to me it doesn't matter where you are, it's about having time together.*

> *Kara: it shows a day where we were having a whole family experience together, and we felt quite close.*

Family togetherness, and associated notions of family time, reflect romanticised heteronormative ideals of family life in which the collective well-being and emotional connectedness, of traditional two-parent families is enhanced by spending time together (e.g. Rose, 2010; Daly, 2001). The posting of photos displaying family time and togetherness position mothers and their families as in line with this normative ideal.

While family togetherness is a theme that runs across on and offline family photography (e.g. Rose, 2010), the display of family togetherness on social media is open to a wider audience since online accounts often comprise a heterogeneous network encompassing offline relationships. In this digital context, togetherness can become more widely contested, particularly for mothers whose family arrangements deviate more starkly from family ideals. One example of this is Sarah's account of posting as a stepmother. Her account recognised stepmothering as a troubled identity (Roper & Capdevila, 2020) because:

> *Sarah: of the circumstances of being not the biological mother, sometimes you sort of think that they don't have as much love or compassion or the same feelings towards someone else's kids.*

The importance of blood ties has been central to both family and mothering ideals. In particular, the notion of the maternal instinct is constituted as engendering emotional connection between mother and child (Ribbens McCarthy, et al. 2017; Rickett, 2016). The trouble with Sarah's mothering position is digitally repaired through the act of posting photos of her 'together' and 'happy' stepfamily:

> *Sarah: Yeah, I like it because it does symbolise that that day was really good fun and I suppose we look like we're enjoying ourselves……The fact that we're all together in one area. I like the fact that there's no division; it's the kids enjoying themselves, it's a happy memory. It was a good day and I like it because it sort of symbolises togetherness ….it was a definite message to say, "This is my family".*

Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2017) argues that "parents may express awareness of their family relationships when they are publicly visible outside the home. This might be associated with a sense of vulnerability in such contexts which might either reinforce a sense of being a family or negatively challenge people's family identities." (p. 72). This is relevant to Sarah's posting as a stepmother. Sarah publicly stakes a claim to the legitimacy of her familial relationships in her digital network using the familiar trope of idealised family togetherness. Arguably, the constitution of family togetherness in photos of non-traditional families could be seen as a challenge to the normativity of traditional family discourses. However, such challenges are curtailed by how posts conveying familial togetherness become aligned with, and thus reproduce, romantized ideals of family life. As (Lazard, 2017) argues, in practice,

most families will be non-normative in one way or another which makes the normative ideals of the traditional family as a form of disciplinarity especially powerful (Foucault, 2004).

The affordances of smartphones as networked devices also become relevant to notions of familial togetherness. Much like traditional family photography, family photos inscribe togetherness through the invitation for close bodily proximities of family members (Rose, 2010). Family selfies in particular highlight how these bodily proximities intensify inscriptions of family togetherness. The forward-facing functions of smartphones emphasise bodily closeness, more so than when a third person takes the photo, in order to make sure all members are captured in frame (Hess, 2015). The link between these smartphone affordances and family togetherness is highlighted in Ella's description of her mother-daughter selfie:

> *Ella: I'd like to think we were very close, me and Grace, definitely, because Grace will always say things like, "Take a picture, mum," or, "Can we have a selfie". Yeah, she does. She does... Yeah, I would like to say we were close. We've got a good relationship.*

Notable in this extract is how selfie-taking is instigated by the daughter rather than the mother. This is important because it negates the trouble with predominant characterisations of selfie-taking as a form of digital narcissism (Lazard & Capdevila, 2021). Potential accusation of narcissism is also headed off in the interview through the construction of the family selfie as a means of *doing* closeness and togetherness. The request by the daughter for a selfie with her mother constitutes familial intimacy as well as a recognisable, everyday act of doing togetherness because selfie-taking is ubiquitous. The photo, therefore, is not merely a representation of mother-child intimacy, it becomes constituted as a digital practice of familial closeness and emotional connectedness.

Digitally relational mothers

Across mothers' accounts, women discussed the possible impact of their postings on existing relationships, for instance, how they might be viewed by friends and other family members. Posted photos of the family were invariably described as "happy" ones. However, the frequent depiction of the happy family in offline family albums has been criticised for obscuring the gendered labour that characterises daily family life (Goc, 2014). This was recognised by many mothers who described what posts did not capture:

> *Sarah: Everything about parenting. [Laughs] That I'm not tidying up, I'm not cooking, I'm not cleaning, I'm not enforcing.*

> *Rachel: so, it doesn't give you a real-life insight into being a mum, because I am just showing four nice pictures of them being cute! They are not like that all the time!*

> *Lucy: it doesn't show her like whinging and moaning when she's tired or when she's hungry or when she wants Mummy or when she wants Daddy and if one of us isn't around, which happens because me and my husband aren't together anymore.*

While many aspects of women's routine household and childcare labours are typically absent from pictures, the work of mothers was constructed as showing up as photographic traces in family pictures, as Ada says:

> *Ada: all the children seem quite happy; it is showing that I am doing much hard work on the children! But yes I think it is showing that I am doing well as a mum, in which I wouldn't put a picture that shows that I am not doing well as a mum… it is about how the picture is going to be viewed.*

While the maternal work that goes into the happy family is a theme that runs across family photography both on and offline (e.g. Rose, 2010), posting family photos was talked about in

the interviews as a more dynamic and contested practice. While offline family photography has long been "looked at, judged and commented on in the company of others" (Boerdam & Oosterbaan Martinus, 1980, p. 94), this social practice is more circumscribed and contained compared to online engagements. The above extract suggests that the happy family photo provides visual evidence of 'good' mothering and is implicitly constituted here as a defensive action against accusations of familial unhappiness and, concomitantly, 'bad' mothering. In line with this, posting was constituted across mothers' accounts as a heavily managed process to avoid online negativity. Ada, for example, talked about how people are "judged" on social media as she says:

> *Ada: I don't normally put pictures of the most luxurious things that I have gone to. I normally put functions, birthdays or visits, family visits. If I go for holidays*

> *Interviewer: Something to celebrate?*

> *Ada: Something to celebrate. I don't put, even if a buy a new car, and put in on Facebook no, that is not me…No I wouldn't put that, because it is like you are trying to show people about … you are trying to show people that you are living okay, but for me, it is about seeing my family. This is who I am now. Of course, celebrations, I graduated, I had a christening, I had a birthday for my daughter. This is my family. I don't want anyone to know that I have a new car or I have eaten in a particular restaurant, what I have eaten on that day, because it can be viewed in a very different way…I have a lot of people that I know that are not in that kind of luxury, so they might think oh I am showing off. Yet I am not showing off, I am just trying to have a connection.*

> *Interviewer: They are judging you again?*

> *Ada: Judging you again, oh how can she do that? Some people are suffering here*

Posts indicative of material wealth are constituted here as insensitive to the "suffering" of those with less disposable financial resources. In making this point, Ada becomes positioned as middle class. She heads off the possible accusation of humblebragging in the interview by justifying her posts as both sensitive and relational – they are about establishing "connection" with others. The potential for othering is elided by constructing a sense of we-ness through the concealment of indicators of wealth and concomitantly her class identity. While it is recognised that intersections with other power relationships, particularly race, play into the display and negotiation of classed identities online (Lazard, 2017), due to space constraints the analysis presented here focuses on gender and class.

In Ada's interview, the construction of class concealment as a process to manage relationships is interwoven with the notion of emotion work. As Hochschild (1983) argues, emotion work involves the day-to-day management of feeling in relationships. This work is a central feature of normative relational femininities (e.g. Holford, 2019). The importance of doing emotion work when managing online displays was similarly raised by Freya when posting photos which imbue wealth:

> *Freya: for example, the holiday stuff, you worry that people might think you are showing off, or you think about people feeling bad?...you don't want to brag, you know.*

Freya constitutes the management of the posting process as one that produces dilemmas. Certain posts become constituted as producing identity trouble for the user if the post can be construed as bragging. Such posts are also presented as causing trouble for mothers who are less able to align themselves with ideals of middle-class mothering. Freya draws attention to this by invoking the position of the other:

> *Freya: "'Is my kid missing out, because I haven't got the money to provide that amount?'"*

In the context of Mothering as something that is continually socially judged and scrutinised (Salter, 2018), the posting of 'happy' family photos is a relatively 'safe' thing to post about. Many of the women interviewed suggested that photos of their children tended to attract what they considered a high number of 'likes' and positive comments compared to other kinds of posts, as Helen suggests:

Helen: "*It's quite difficult to not like pictures of people's kids*".

So the image of the happy family on social networking sites was at least in part positioned as a defensive action to ward against conflict and troubled identities like "show off" or "attention seeker" as well as head off any risk of judgement associated with negative posting about the family. This construction runs counter to sharenting discourses which construct parental sharing as humblebragging and source of conflict.

Proud Mothers

In keeping with the presentation of family life on social media as positive, pride was frequently drawn on to justify the posting of family photos. This can be seen in Tara's description of one of her posts which congratulates her son on passing his driver's test:

Tara: I was very proud really because he passed first time

The mobilisation of pride marks the event as momentous and signals that Tara cares about her son's achievement. Similarly, Lucy references pride in relation to photos of children's achievement:

Lucy: Because you're proud, aren't you? It's a proud moment, especially as first time mums or parents or whatever, "Ah, they've done it, they've done it," and, yeah, it's a tick box, isn't it, sort of thing that they've done it and they're doing the right developmental things

As mentioned earlier, posted family photos become part of women's identity projects on social media. As such, maternal subjectivities become highly visible and foregrounded in relation to children's successes (Lazard et al., 2019). As indicated in Lucy's extract above, publicly ticking off normative developmental milestones becomes positioned as a reflection of mother-child achievement of doing the "right things". This is particularly important since mothers are held accountable for their children's progress (Johnson, 2014). The foregrounding of mother-child success is exemplified in Ella's account of her posted photos of her daughter's dance competition:

> *Ella: because I felt proud of her and I've created this beautiful little creature and she just made me so proud. She's just blossomed into a gorgeous, intelligent little girl who, yeah, and that feeling at that moment, I had to share it. I was so proud of her. I mean I don't share everything, I just share things that I tend to be proud of.*

> *Interviewer: So what is it exactly you like about that post? What is it you like about that photo?*

> *Ella: Well look at her. She's four years old and she's got her face full of makeup. She just looks so much grown up than what she is, and she just made me so proud that it was her first dancing competition and she was excited and she just looks like a little doll. She just looks beautiful. And I was so proud. She makes me so proud….I think I was just overwhelmed that day. I was just so proud of what she's becoming and where she's going and things. I was just proud of her that day. She made me so proud.*

Intensive mothering discourses (e.g. Hays, 1996) posit mothers as key facilitators of their children's level of achievement. This can be seen in Ella's account by reference to her own mothering role in the event – she 'created' her daughter; she has facilitated her daughter's achievements. This display of 'good' intensive mothering chimes with Foucault's (1978-

1979) ideas of neoliberal investment in children as human capital – maternal investments in education and training for example are not only are understood as making calculable increases in individual well-being but enhances doing well in terms of future salary and consuming (Burchell et al., 2008). This resonates with Ella's display of maternal care about her daughter's future trajectory as she says, *"I was just so proud of what she's becoming and where she's going and things"*. Thus, Ella becomes positioned as in line with neoliberal mandates and thus a 'good' mother. This can be seen further in Ella's financial investment in her daughter's successes:

> *Ella: She gets what she wants. If she needs new tap shoes, she gets new tap shoes. She goes to all these shows. I've just forked out a bomb for a dancing outfit.*

In contrast to class concealment mentioned earlier, Ella explicitly takes up a middle-class intensive mothering subject position here. However, her classed identity is not straightforward. Her descriptions are grounded in a construction of the experience of being a lone mother where her partner:

> *Ella: ...left two weeks after I had her so then I was completely on my own, and that's not how I expected being a mother to be, doing it on your own. I went into being a mother as a couple ... I wanted a proper family life...I struggled because my expectations of how family life should be, how it appears to be is just not how it is at all. So yeah, I really struggled coming to terms with all that...it was awful. That's when I just felt as though I'd failed massively.*

Lone motherhood remains a stigmatised and homogenised identity in the UK with lone mothers frequently criticised for their economic dependence on the state and presumptions of poor parenting (Morris & Munt, 2019). Ella's displays of classed intensive mothering become

a means to manage her identity within her network by repairing her troubled identity as a lone mother. Social media comments and 'likes' makes manifest the outcome of repair:

> *Ella: Some people reacted to it and they loved it. They were saying, "She's just like you. She looks gorgeous. Well done Ella, you've done a brilliant job".*

Audience response on social media thus provide a calculable measure of doing well and so, in a broad sense, it is a collaboration around standards and virtues for doing parenting and doing family.

That Ella is constituted as doing a "brilliant job" also speaks to notions of facilitative mothering which is resonant with authentic pride. As mentioned earlier, authentic pride is understood as rooted in a balanced, rather than falsely inflated, sense of success attributable to effort (e.g., Tracy & Robins, 2007; Tracey et al., 2009). Pride as authentic rather than hubristic serves to counter sharenting discourses in which posting is treated as a display of hubristic pride associated with narcissism. Hubristic sharenting was, however, mobilised to problematise other mothers' online displays. As Charlotte says:

> *Charlotte: all these young mothers, they're all on the same wavelength, they all seem to be in competition as mothers, very materialistic, "Look what I've got for my daughter, look what I do, she's got a new dancing outfit, she's got this, she's got that, he's got this… he's a perfect little boxer, look how he's boxing", I see all that but yet, when you actually read the posts, you can read beyond…I can see all the issues they've got.*

Here, Charlotte draws on sharenting discourses to problematize the display of middle-class intensive mothering by positioning these "young mothers" as showing off. Indeed, the comment "look what I can do" frames such posts as self-aggrandisement of one's own abilities which is resonant with the expression of narcissistic hubristic pride and concomitantly psychological "issues". It is notable that sharenting is constituted as something

that "young" millennial mothers do. Research suggests that it is typically the online photo editing and sharing practices of millennials and women which have routinely become the object of social disapproval and this seems to extend to digital displays of mothering (Lazard & Capdevila, 2021).

The construction of narcissistic feminine pride and "competition" in this extract works as a normative counterpoint to 'good' femininities in which women are called on to perform non-competitive and supportive relationality (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). These positionings serve to undermine young mothers as 'good' mothers and 'good' women because it is the mother's self-aggrandisement rather than the child's achievement that is prioritised. Sharenting, as constructed in this extract, points to the ways in which intensive mothering engagements on and offline co-occur with neoliberalism regimes around individual achievement and perfectionism. As McRobbie (2015) argued, aspirations of the perfect life emerge "as a highly hetero-normative vector of competition for young women" (p. 7). However, as the above extract indicates, competitive individualism and perfectionism sits uncomfortably with 'good' femininities which makes alignment to these positions in the context of mothering particularly precarious.

Discussion

This study examined mothers' identity work in their talk about posting family photos to social media. Mothers' display of family for consumption by their social network presents relational dilemmas which necessitate particular work by mothers to manage the presentation of their identity and family life within parameters of social acceptability. This work appears intensified for mothers whose circumstances do not easily fit with ideals of the nuclear family (e.g., stepmothers, lone mothers) and whose mothering identities are troubled and in need of repair (e.g., Roper & Capdevila, 2020). In this study, the posting of family photos was

constituted as a form of digital repair, in which family photographic conventions for pictorially representing 'good' families (happiness, togetherness), and 'good' parenting (pride), was constituted as visual evidence of mothers' alignment with 'good' mothering ideals.

The use of posted family photos as online repair of offline troubled identities was complicated by the potential for sharenting criticism of digital mothering identities as narcissistic (Lazard et al., 2019). The process of photo selection was constituted as central to navigating sharenting discourses and required mothers to attend to issues of classed othering and appropriate displays of maternal pride in their posts. For example, mothers' posts needed to be seen as middle class enough to offset troubled mothering identities, such as the lone mother, and to align themselves with intensive mothering ideals. However, in their display of the middle-class family, mothers also needed to downplay privilege to avoid both accusations of 'showing off' and classed conflict with members of the online audience. The negativity associated with showing off was also managed by mothers by how pride was constituted in relation to their posted photos. In this study, authentic mother pride is presented to justify posting as it is grounded in 'good' parenting discourses as well as in its relational orientation which marks it as distinct from hubristic, narcissistic pride. In this way, mothers can position themselves as aligned to neoliberal calls for parents to take individual responsibility for their children's achievement whilst, at the same time, avoiding the criticisms of both competitive intensive mothering and sharenting.

The complex identity and repair work highlighted in this research contributes to the sharenting literature by drawing attention to how the posting of family photos is constituted as a precarious, fragile and dynamic practice in which mothers are subject to, and manage, competing social expectations around motherhood (e.g. intensive mothering), femininity (non-competitive, supportive orientations; emotion work) and neoliberalism (competitive

individualism and achievement). Posting about family represents yet another context in which women risk and manage negative evaluation, and perform emotion work, which serve to increase self-regulation with respect to digital mothering practices and adds to the significant identity work already carried out by mothers within intensive mothering frames. The relational work of mothers was characterised as a careful choreography of affective-discursive practices, which work in complex ways in the rhetorical management of networked relationships and maternal identity display. The mobilisation of positive, rather than negative, affect in posted family photos was constituted as means to deflect or defuse the possibility of online conflict as well as audience accusation of poor mothering. This is contrary, and offers a challenge to, sharenting discourses which posit parental sharing as the source of conflict (e.g. Lipu & Siibak, 2019; Verswijvel, et al., 2019; Blum-Ross & Livingston, 2017).

At the same time, the use of idealised family photos as a form of digital repair also points to the difficulties that mothers experience in resisting gendered pressures to conform to mothering and family ideals. While repair was examined in this study by attention to how mothers managed troubled identities associated with diverse family forms, the sample mainly comprised of white participants who self-identified as heterosexual and positioned themselves as lower middle class to middle class. To address this limitation, future research could consider examining other intersectional digital parenting engagements, (e.g. those who identify with gender fluid positions, LGBTQIA parents, working class parents) to investigate a greater range of identity trouble and how resistance to parenting pressures is performed.

Whilst not a focus of this research, there is the added pressure of how the routine practice of parental sharenting is constituted as a transgression of the digital rights and privacy of children in both academic and popular discourse. While this is undoubtedly a key concern for children as networked subjects (e.g. Livingston & Third, 2017; Lupton &

Williamson, 2017), examination of these ethical dilemmas may benefit from contextualisation within the complexities and difficulties of motherhood. This context would potentially allow for a more nuanced examination of how ethical concerns around family-related posting are negotiated by mothers (Chalken & Anderson, 2017). Future research which attends to how sharing practices are understood, co-produced and negotiated by families is critical for developing understandings of family photo posting that moves away from the vilification and dismissal of digital mothers within sharenting frames.

Acknowledgements

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