

#mothersday: Constructions of motherhood and femininity in social media posts

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Abstract

Images and representations of parenting, and particularly mothering, have become commonplace on social media platforms over the past decade. These displays, however, take place in the context of popular contemporary discourses around gender and parenting that are in many ways prescriptive. This paper explores the constructions of mothering online through an analysis of posts about mothers on Mother's Day from 2018 to 2020. Data were collected from Instagram and Twitter using hashtags such as #mothersday, #happymothersday and #motheringsunday. Both content and thematic analyses were conducted. This paper will consider three main themes that were identified in the data: "Beauty & biology"; "Grief & loss" and "Care (& COVID)", with a focus on

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constructions of gendered parenting and family through the explicit celebration of the lives and roles of mothers. The findings provide insight into normative constructions of gender and how these are mediated through the affordances of social media platforms in a neoliberal context.

Keywords

mother's Day, mothering, social media, femininity, family

In this paper we explore the reproduction of mothering online through an analysis of posts collected from social networking sites (SNS) on Mother's Day (or Mothering Sunday in the UK). Mother's Day was chosen as it is generally regarded as socially important in those countries in which it is celebrated. As Antolini (2014) suggests, the promotion of this annual event within social, commercial and political contexts serves to define and use the symbolic power of motherhood, bringing our attention to the ways in which Mother's Day functions as both a celebration and a cultural representation of motherhood. Mother's Day, thus, offers an interesting space to explore how themes and discourses around mothering play out.

Mothering and Mother's Day

In their classic text on motherhood published over three decades ago, Phoenix and Woollett (1991) wrote: "Most people have been mothered at some time, and whether that experience has been good or bad, relationships with mothers usually generate strong feelings for much of the life course" (p. 1). This quote speaks to the inevitable embeddedness of mothers within everyday life. For over half a century, feminist scholars challenged the patriarchal ideologies that dominate conceptualisations of mothers, mothering and motherhood; from Nancy Russo's (1976) critique of the motherhood mandate, which presented motherhood as central to the definition of the adult female, to Sharon Hays' (1996) examination of the intensive mothering imperative which demands the "good" mother be child centred and unrelenting in her investment in her children's outcomes. According to Green (2015), after decades of feminist action, the order of priorities for mothers has become "children, career, spouse and household" (p. 199). That is to say, mothers remain firmly behind the scenes in their own narratives.

Mother's Day as an occasion explicitly foregrounds mothers, yet its origins are complex and do not easily align with feminist narratives. Historically, Mother's Day has been closely linked to a number of Christian traditions, including those around the devotion to the Virgin Mary, the American Sunday school union and, in the UK, an annual return to one's mother church. Historians have argued that whilst the sentimentalisation of motherhood was a product of the 19th century, the establishment of Mother's Day in the USA in the early 20th century was the result of a backlash against the progress being achieved by women at that time (e.g., Jones, 1980). In the hundred or so years since the current version of Mother's Day was re-established (through a sustained campaign by

American Anna Jarvis), it has spread globally. Although not always on the same day of the year, it is a widely observed annual tradition in almost 200 countries. It is sometimes marked as a recognised public holiday or held on a Sunday to facilitate family celebrations. According to historian Antolini (2014), the date has always provided “a platform for a cultural debate over the intrinsic value of motherhood and the appropriate boundaries of the maternal role” (p. 2). It is at this time, when motherhood becomes most visible, we would argue, that the parameters of maternal acceptability are most evident.

The limited literature available on understandings of Mother’s Day led us to expect a preponderance of terms around traditional mothering values. In one of the few relevant studies, Weisz (1980) conducted a content analysis of children’s letters about their mothers to a local newspaper on the occasion of Mother’s Day. The focus of that study was on the children and differences across groups. However, in the process of conducting this study the researcher identified the response categories that attended to the mother’s behaviour (e.g., around affection, advocacy, nurturance, etc.). Other dimensions, such as physical attributes, were ignored in the study though no explicit rationale was provided for this choice. Likewise, in 2013, the *Huffington Post* produced a word cloud based on people’s answers when asked to describe their mothers in three words. These were words such as “loving”, “strong”, “beautiful”, and “caring”. Our findings varied from both of these previous examples.

Mothering and the digital

The visibility of mothering on SNS is particularly interesting because it foregrounds mothering identities and experience in a way that was perhaps not possible, at least not as prominently, before the routine use of such sites. However, more than this, it offers an opportunity to explore how mothers’ relationships with family can be publicly represented. With the now routine practice of posting on social media, commemorations of Mother’s Day have also shifted increasingly online. When we began this research, Facebook had just reported that in 2017, Mother’s Day “drove more posts in a single day than any other topic on Facebook in the last year”. Analogously, in 2017, Twitter recorded 729 million tweets about Mother’s Day. This pattern has been markedly accelerated by the onset of the global pandemic in 2020 which forced the physical distancing of families not living in the same household, making online communication a more practicable option. Although mothers do post on this day, it is mostly the case that they will be posted about by their children while friends, family and followers will comment on these posts. This makes possible the exploration of a multiplicity of relational issues and concerns around motherhood which are displayed visually and textually online.

The developments in digital technologies in the last two decades have created space for the networking of mothering including, pregnancy monitoring, app-based journaling of child development, digital legacies, “mommy blogging”, and mother-dedicated discussion forums as well as, of course (e.g., Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Johnson, 2014, 2015). Social networking usage patterns consistently show that women engage more frequently than men with both SNS (Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Tankovska, 2021) and online photo sharing practices (e.g., Dhir et al., 2016; Thelwall & Vis, 2017). As a

result, although both mothers and fathers share child-related content online, research indicates that mothers post information about their children, particularly family photos, with greater frequency than fathers on social media (Ammari et al., 2015). So, what might initially appear as generically parental behaviour in terms of social media engagement is, in practice, discernibly gendered. Moreover, gendered patterns around social media practices have become relevant to how specific digital mothering engagements online are understood. Specifically, mothers' posts about their children and family have been largely characterised within popular arenas as "sharenting", a practice that has become heavily associated with repetition, humblebragging, and digital narcissism. Recent studies have, however, highlighted that mothers' social media practices are more complex and nuanced than sharenting discourses imply (Lazard et al., 2019). Within this context, the celebration of Mother's Day online represents an interesting counterpoint to negative characterisations of the display of mothering and family online.

While there has more recently been an increase of research on digital sharing of family and child focused content, it is still the case that sustained empirical scholarship in this area is in its infancy. Moreover, resonant with the broader mothering research discussed above, the growing body of work in this area tends to foreground the child rather than the mother, exploring the impact of parental sharing on children's privacy (Fox & Hoy, 2019; Marasli et al., 2016) and their online safety (e.g., Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Kopecky et al., 2020). When it does focus on the mother, it is perhaps not surprising to find that much of the attention is predicated on broader social imperatives around good and bad mothering that have been drawn into online spaces.

Research has for some time documented how the "intensive mothering" imperatives, referenced above, play out in and through dedicated parenting forums and online mothering communities (Moravec, 2011; Morris, 2014). The prescription that "good" mothers make an "emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive and financially expensive" investment in their children is a heavily middle-classed ideal (Hays, 1996, p. 8). This practice has been specifically examined in relation to dedicated mothering sites, most commonly Mumsnet (a popular and large online community based in the United Kingdom) which sees around seven million website visits per month (Mumsnet, 2021). For instance, Pedersen (2016), in her analysis of threads posted to Mumsnet, highlighted nuances around how intensive mothering discourses were used in digital discussion boards in order to establish "good mothering". She found ideals of good mothering to be present. However, these tended to be fluid and subject to change (see also Mackenzie, 2018), and while such ideals were drawn on to constitute good mothering identities, they were also resisted and reworked in relation to everyday parenting difficulties. Beyond Mumsnet, researchers have been able to document similar processes around women's navigation of good/bad mothering discourses and the work that goes into positioning themselves as "good" mothers (Locke, 2015; Pedersen & Smithson, 2013; Roper, 2017). Our research extends this work to explore these constructions in public postings on social networking sites about mothering by other family members, such as their children and partners. Our research question was *How are mothers represented and how is mothering constructed in Instagram and Twitter posts on the occasion of Mother's Day?*

Methodology

Data collection

Data for this study were collected from Instagram and Twitter twice yearly in 2018, 2019, and 2020. The first data collection date was Mothering Sunday in the UK, which is celebrated on the fourth Sunday in Lent or three weeks before Easter Sunday, the specific dates being 11 March 2018, 31 March 2019, and 22 March 2020. The second date was that chosen as the most frequent for Mother's Day internationally, which is the second Sunday of May, specifically 13 May 2018, 12 May 2019, and 10 May 2020.

Each year on the designated day we searched for the hashtags #motheringsunday, #mothersday, #happymothersday and #mothersday2018/2019/2020 (as appropriate). We focused on publicly available accounts (not privacy protected) on Instagram and Twitter. We endeavoured to select the top posts in terms of engagement. However, this was by necessity a best estimate. We had no access to the algorithms used by either platform and, in any case, these would have changed across the period. Due to our strategy around engagement, a number of the posts identified were for individuals who enjoyed some level of celebrity, though that was not always the case. We collected both the posts and the comments that followed. Virtually all the posts on both platforms included text and images as well as the widespread use of emojis – perhaps unsurprising, given their popularity within text speak. For each hashtag on each platform, we looked at the top 10 posts and excluded any posts that were either irrelevant or advertising. The complete data set comprised approximately 50,000 words.

Ethics

At the time of the first study in 2018, it was yet unclear whether data collection of social media feeds constituted research on publicly available data or with human participants. Whilst, at the time, the data being collected were, for research purposes, considered to be in the public domain, we agreed to take the latter more stringent approach and submitted our design for approval from the university ethics committee for research with human participants. Although we followed the same security procedures across the three-year period, we were keenly aware of the shifting nature of what constitutes research with human participants, what constitutes public domain, and the changing parameters of acceptability with respect to online postings and their use in research (Eynon et al., 2019; Ravn et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2017). With respect to ethical dissemination, and in order to protect anonymity of posters in our study, we have described images rather than including them directly. Moreover, we have checked the searchability of posts and only included direct extracts from those that are no longer searchable on the platforms or through Google. Posts that remain searchable have been described so that, while they retain their original meaning, they are no longer identifiable. Our analyses, however, have been conducted on the original data and we have been careful that this has not produced any discrepancies in our reporting.

Analysis

Once collected, the data were transferred to NVivo software for analysis. Each year was initially analysed individually and, as the research progressed, in relation to the other two. In each case we first carried out a content analysis as a method of organising the data and to draw attention to any prominent patterns in the language use that might otherwise have been missed. While the years were broadly similar in terms of topics, the balance varied and, of course, the context in 2020 was different. The first COVID-19 lockdown in the UK started only a few days before Mother's Day in 2020, and both the March and May dates for 2020 took place when physical distancing was required between those living in different homes. Whilst being distant from loved ones appeared in each of our datasets, this featured unsurprisingly highly in the 2020 data. Over the three years of data collection, there was a transition not just from Mother's Day being celebrated in person to online, but also to a global context that forced these celebrations online.

Another interesting pattern identified in the initial treatment of data, though only descriptive in nature, was the results of the NVivo sentiment analysis, an inbuilt feature which automatically machine codes sentiment content using a Likert scale (e.g., very negative through to very positive). This analysis identified the ratio of positive to negative terms as much higher for 2020 (7.1:1) as compared to 2018 (5.7:1). These considerations informed the fuller analysis which, in turn, contextualised relevant patterns of sentiment.

The dataset was then subjected to a (reflexive) thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2020). RTA was particularly suited to the project as it allowed the team to centre our relevant subjectivities which cannot be disentangled from the analytic process. For example, our status as mothers or levels of engagement with social media were undoubtedly salient in this study. On each occasion, all members of the research team analysed the data independently and then came together to discuss coding and theme development. The analysis was incremental, reflexive, and iterative, so in the second and third year we also attended to elements from previous analyses as well as looking for any novel patterns. The process allowed us to identify subtle conceptual distinctions between, for example, constructions of emotional connection that were particularly relevant to grief for mothers lost through death and constructions of care linking mothers and children who were temporarily separated in the pandemic context. For the purposes of this paper we use those extracts that the authors concurred best exemplify the themes discussed.

Finally, as the analytic method was textual and it was not always possible to reliably extract some of the photos and emojis, rather than include these images in the analysis, we treated them as relevant contextual features to inform the findings as appropriate.

Findings and discussion

Three themes were identified as dominant in the context of our research question *How are mothers represented and how is mothering constructed in Instagram and Twitter posts on the occasion of Mother's Day?* We labelled these:

1. Beauty & biology
2. Grief & loss
3. Care (& COVID)

We now turn to each of the three themes to explore how each represents mothers and thus functions to construct mothering.

Beauty & biology

The visibility of mothers, particularly in family photos posted on social media, is grounded in wider social expectations and requirements about the presentation of femininity. Of relevance is how the recent display of the feminine self in posted photos is embedded within long-standing social imperatives around feminine beauty (e.g., slim, young, and blemish free) (see Lazard & Capdevila, 2021). Feminine beauty has become increasingly implicated in discourses around “good” maternal subjectivities. As Tsaliki (2019) suggests, with the increased presence of mothers in visual culture, the maternal body has become “a symbol and the ‘management tool’ for both the ideal fit body and ‘perfect’ motherhood” (p. 6), which is exemplified by the phenomenon of the display of maternal bodies on social media conforming to feminine beauty standards. However, the relationship between feminine beauty and motherhood predates the more recent display of maternal beauty on social media.

Nichter (2009) argued that advertisements in the 1990s and 2000s proliferated images of youthful, glamorous mothers with similarly styled pre-adolescent daughters. Nichter draws attention to how similarity operates within such images to produce the operation of beauty standards within familial (particularly mother/child) relationships. Becker et al. (2005) point to how family resemblance, particularly between parents and children, is popularly understood as an outward bodily marker of the biological relationship. Familial biological connection can be constituted through comments and questions about a child’s physical similarity to their parents and family members. Becker et al. (2005) refer to this as “resemblance talk”. Resemblance thus acts as a cultural signifier of family membership and belonging and reinforces biological connectedness within an assumed “natural order of things and supports a hierarchy of legitimacy, in which a clear physical resemblance to family members confers greater legitimacy, while the legitimacy of those who lack a resemblance to the family is questioned, subjecting them to stigma” (Becker et al., 2005, p. 1301). Given the association between resemblance and the legitimacy of familial relationships, physical similarity has become a signifier of family bond and emotional closeness (e.g., Isaksson et al., 2019). This is resonant with how the notion of blood ties has been central to both family and mothering ideals. For families who do not fit into discourses around the biological family, there may be a heightened sense of awareness of their familial relationships in public spaces. As Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2017) suggest, for these families, the public visibility of their relationships “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). These observations appear particularly relevant to the display of family

on social media on Mother's Day in which many of the posts foregrounded children and family.

Post 1: Visibilities. We begin with an example of a mother who posted a photo of her visibly mixed-race family. The image included herself, as a white mother, with her two mixed-raced young sons sitting on the lap of their black father. The father's arms visibly encircle the family in the photo which accompanies the post and comments.

Post: My boys, my world. #mothersday2018 #happymothersday

Comments:

- Beautiful family ♥◻♥◻♥◻
- GORGEOUS xx
- Happy Mother's Day- hope you had a lovely day with your beautiful family
 ♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥◻◻◻◻😊😊😊😊♥♥♥♥👉👉👉👉🙏
 😊😊😊♥♥♥👉👉👉👉🙏😊😊😊♥♥♥👉👉👉👉🙏
 😊😊😊♥♥♥👉👉👉👉🙏♥️🙏🙏🙏🙏
- Such a lovely photo. Hope you had a great day xxx
- Ah they're gorgeous! A beautiful photo x
- Beautiful family ♥◻

The post functions as an announcement by the mother that her children are her world, in line with good mothering discourses in which mothers are expected to centre and prioritise their children. The post together with the happy family photo emphasises the significance of the mother-child relationship using well-established cultural tropes. More specifically, the display of togetherness, typically presented in family photos through the spatial proximity of members, and markers of closeness through touch, reflect romanticised ideals of "good" family life in which members are emotionally connected and the collective well-being of the family is enhanced by being together (e.g., Rose, 2010). Thus, the post positions both the mother and her family in line with normative ideals of family life.

These normative ideals can be very narrow, so that many families will fall outside of these bounds. For example, those in same-sex relationships, stepfamilies, mixed-race families and many others will not see themselves reflected in normative ideas of family, making this reproduction of the status quo especially powerful. Just as Roper and Capdevila (2020) found in their study of stepmothers, this may leave mothers in non-normative families undertaking considerable work (including in online spaces) to produce their families as "normal". So, for this visibly mixed-race family, it could be argued, it becomes more important than for visibly normative families, to rely on these tropes to establish this normative "happy family" identity.

The online audience responds with approval in the comments. The description "beautiful" features most often in this thread alongside other lesser-used synonyms (e.g., "gorgeous", "stunning"). These favour the visual and respond to surface appearance. Indeed, "beautiful" here works as a powerful compliment over other possible descriptions such as

“lovely” or “nice”. In this case, the post can be understood as successful as the “beautiful family”, and thus the good mother, is produced and validated by the comments.

Post 2: Physicality. The centrality of the visual afforded by social media thus appears to shape audience engagement in ways which allow for comment on the physicality of those featured in the accompanying photos. This is illustrated in a post which, in contrast to the previous one, was made by an adult daughter for her mother on Mother’s Day. The thread reads:

Post:

HAPPY MOTHERS DAY TO MY BEAUTIFUL, SELFLESS, AMAZING MOTHER!
 ✨✨✨ Thank you for supporting me in chasing my dreams and being my best friend through it all. I love you! ❤️☐

Comments:

- So beautiful and lovely! Happy Mother’s Day to her! ❤️❤️☐✨
- Awesome pic... You two definitely look alike!
- Beautiful ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️
- Dang. That was pretty clear haha. Go Amanda & her mom!!!!
- Beauties. ❤️❤️❤️😊❤️✨
- Well I see exactly where you got your beauty from Amanda !! 😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊
- Amanda, your mom is a beautiful lady and I hope she had the best Mother’s Day ever!!!! You favor her a lot too!
- One heck of a mother... she obviously raised a beautiful, selfless, amazing daughter too!!!
- Never quit. #MotivationMonday
- Happy Mother’s Day to your mom Amanda 😊😊
- Really beautiful Amanda
- Wow I can see where u get ur Beauty from ur mother did u enjoy the day with her?

In this study, young women’s uploads tended to draw on specific mothering ideals to celebrate their mothers – the idea that the mother’s labour is invested in the support and development of their children and that “good mothers” are selfless. In this post the mother is described as beautiful but also as amazing and as selfless. The daughter thanks her mother for supporting her in pursuing her dreams. The accompanying photo shows the mother standing behind her young adult daughter, in a supportive pose, at a competitive event. Thus, the mother is aligned with intensive mothering discourses in that she is positioned, both physically and discursively, as self-sacrificial and an active facilitator of her daughter’s achievement. Mother-child togetherness in the photo is further inscribed by reference to the emotional connectedness and intimacy in that the mother is described as her “best friend”.

“Beautiful” is used in the post itself but it is prioritised specifically in the responses. What is highlighted is shared, biologically-based aspects of physicality which constitutes

the basis for the mother-child connection. The biological connection is flagged (“You two definitely look alike”) and the physical attractiveness of both mother and daughter is grounded in that biological connection (“I see exactly where you got your beauty from”). In this thread, the compliment “beautiful” is more clearly gendered and located in well-established social imperatives around feminine beauty. The objectifying quality of the word “beautiful” in the responses is in line with the practice of offering supportive comments (e.g., “like” culture) that are common in postings by young women (Capdevila & Lazard, 2021). This perpetuates normative constructions of gender through online postings of familial relationships.

Post 3: Similarity. An appeal to biological connections based on appearance is further illustrated in a post, including a mother-son photo, by a mixed-race adult son publicly thanking his white mother. His post explains how delighted he is to always share moments of pride in his life with his mother before anyone else and punctuates it with a flower emoji.

Comments:

- This is so sweet 🌸
- Wow you really look like her!
- You look just like her 🍷❤️💙
- Your Mum hasn't changed a bit still looking good❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️🍷🍷x
- Beautiful! God bless both of you 🖤👍❤️😄😄❤️❤️❤️🙏😊

In addition to the use of the word “beautiful”, the responses to this post comment that the son looks just like his mother, that she has not changed and is still “looking good”. In this post, reference to pride is noteworthy as it is interwoven with parental facilitation of children’s successes and, thus, with parental care and “good parenting” (Lazard et al., 2019). As mentioned earlier, within intensive mothering discourses, this process of facilitation is highly gendered with mothers positioned as principally enabling children’s achievements – mother-child achievement becomes inextricably linked. The thread following the post responds mainly, however, to the mother-son photo that accompanies the post. Similar to the previous post, biological aspects of their appearance are highlighted to reinforce the mother-child connection. This appeal to similarity is particularly interesting because the mother and son are very different on many standard descriptive criteria such as gender, age, race, hair, even height. Yet in this context it becomes appropriate to highlight this similarity – to validate, in a sense, the relationship. The emphasis on physicality also serves to highlight physical attractiveness, in this case, in relation to the mother. Imperatives around feminine beauty are at play here as can be seen in one comment that the mother is “still” looking good. This explicitly draws on specific Western beauty ideals, which posit youth as central to beauty, and are grounded in the implication that this is despite her increased age – that looking good is something of value at any age.

The theme of beauty and biology, of the physicality of mothering relationships, was used across the data to construct the “good mother”, and the mother that we should

celebrate on Mother's Day, bringing together, as Antolini (2014) says, the celebration with the cultural representation of motherhood.

Grief & loss

Whilst most posts in our data were positively framed, not all Mother's Days are celebrated equally, or even celebrated at all. Each year on and around Mother's Day, posts and images are shared that acknowledge those who may have lost mothers, lost a child, have difficult mother relationships, strained child relationships, as well as those who yearn to be mothers. Pearce (2011) writes about the importance of how we ourselves become defined through the absence of someone significant in our lives. Mother's Day, thus, whilst not always comforting, happy, or celebratory, can encompass a complex set of emotions, which we now see more manifestly in online spaces than is the case in offline environments.

Moyer and Enck (2020) note, in their work on the digitalisation of grief on Facebook, how the internet has changed the field of death and dying, and in particular how death, memorial, and loss are depicted on social media. To describe these new practices, Stroebe and Schut (2005) have proposed the theory of "continuing bonds", whereby attachments and relationships between the bereaved and the deceased are maintained through social media postings. Moyer and Enck (2020) explain that this is done in a variety of ways, including open conversational posts with the deceased on profile pages, tagging the deceased (if their social media accounts are still active) in posts, and lastly, using a hashtag to ensure their posts are aggregated with those of others on particular threads. They argue that postings to the deceased may aid in the grieving process as well as serving to normalise displays of grief and loss following bereavement. In Moyer and Enck's (2020) study, one quarter of the users surveyed claimed to post messages to observe a special occasion, perhaps a birthday, the anniversary of a death or, indeed, Mother's Day.

Social media, thus, provides us with the opportunity to share such experiences, and to connect with others in this way. Before social media, we might not have had as much access to communities of people with similar experiences. Upton Patton et al. (2018) in their investigation of young people's expression of grief on Twitter, discuss a new kind of "support group" for grief, whereby people look to share their feelings and thoughts with others, rather than grief as something that is isolating and kept to oneself. This sharing of grief was not only a plea for support but also provided opportunities for exchange and sense making with others, to validate different understandings of grief, and to provide a space for the co-construction of narratives that might otherwise be too difficult to articulate.

Posts 4 and 5: Sympathy/Empathy. In our study, among those expressing grief and loss, many posts provided an opportunity for the individual to reflect, while others served as an opportunity for open discussion with others. Within the Mother's Day hashtags that we analysed, we were able to observe how online communities drew on notions of sympathy and empathy as a familiar format through which to discuss loss, particularly on a day that celebrates traditional expressions of love. Posts around grief and loss, as we

have indicated, can function to create bonds or even communities. Posts 4 and 5 did so in different but aligned ways.

Post 4 announces the poster's decision to take a break from social media following the recent death of their mother. The extract below is taken from the subsequent thread.

- Deepest sympathy and I wish you peace.
- so sorry.
- Sincerest sympathy for your loss! Thoughts with you!
- So sorry to hear this. Take care
- My condolences

Post 5 displays a photo of a mother who is hugging two young women on either side of her. The accompanying post and comments read as follows:

Post

My beautiful mummy♥☐♥♥♥♥☐ we were in NYC, not long before she died. Mother's Day is super tough without her. Being a mummy is super tough without her. I am creating [a digital scrapbook] in her honour... Happy Mother's Day to all of the mummys, daughters, sons and a special shout out to people who are bereaved of their mummy or child on this day. I love you

Comments:

- Happy Late Mother's Day to you! ...Such a sweet picture of all 3 of you, it is a nice memory to have. I'm sure you keep her memory alive with your children.
- Lost my Mum when i was 11. I feel your pain xx
- Always I think of you all ♥ much love ♥
- Your mother is beautiful. Thank you for sharing this wonderful picture. So sorry for your loss. I'm sure you miss her everyday.

Posts 4 and 5 can be distinguished by how they produce responses which orientate sympathy or empathy primarily. While these terms have often been used interchangeably in the literature, Hein and Singer (2008) argue that the subtle distinction is how empathy orientates towards perspective taking and shared experience whereas sympathy orientates towards recognition of another's experience. The responses to Post 4 were, without exception, short and aimed to express condolences for the poster. Words and formulations used to respond were orientated to the poster's current need (news of death) and recognition of the poster's plight. These are more closely related to sympathy than an empathetic sharing of emotional experience (e.g., Cuff et al., 2016). Post 5, on the other hand, whilst similar in posting about the death of the mother, provides more detail around feelings of loss and the management of memory. The comments on this post are, for the most part, much longer, narrating their own experience and thus framed within empathetic sharing (e.g., Cuff et al., 2016). Although displays of sympathy

are also evident in the comments, they primarily reference a shared experience and expressed empathy.

In summary, the affordances of the platform allowed for different forms of engagement. There were posts that encouraged empathy – these contained their own descriptions of love, of memories shared with their mother when going through old family photos, as well as the reason for the loss. However, these also came with an extension of empathy to others – the posts were not just about their own experience and a way of capturing their own grief, but also offered support to those with similar experiences. By reaching out in this way, the exchange became more open, and invited commenters to reciprocate with feelings of empathy. They moved beyond the “sorry for your loss” type of comment traditionally most common in these contexts, to comments that recognised the feelings of pain and sharing that pain. Through acknowledging shared grief, the exchange became more relational, producing a community of sharing.

We would argue that social media platforms, due to their asynchronous nature (Sturkenboom et al., 2013) and blurring of the public/private divide (Grudz & Hernández-García, 2018), are particularly adept at facilitating these exchanges. Rather than empathy just being expressed in person, social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram have become a kind of virtual condolence card, whereby self-disclosure becomes more commonplace to show support for others. By processing grief in this alternative manner, the ability to share, exchange, support, and narrate provided examples of nuances in grief that validated experiences. In these grief-related posts, motherhood was constructed as intricately embroiled in current experience in a way that illustrated how significant these relationships and celebrations were, even if the mother was no longer physically present.

Post 6: Embodiment. The physical embodiment of mothering was also evident across the posts about grief and loss. This notion, we would argue, is embedded in our everyday discourse and practice and (arguably) underpinned by extensive research around good parenting and, more specifically, good mothering. We have been told that babies recognise their mother’s voice in the womb (e.g., Mehler et al., 1978) and from the moment of birth “skin-to-skin” contact (SSC) is encouraged both in the literature and by health professionals. It has similarly been argued that practices such as “babywearing”, integral to attachment parenting, serve to reinforce the physical closeness critical to the formation of the mother-child bond (Sears, 1983). Given the purchase of these notions in everyday discourse, it is perhaps unsurprising that this physicality was repeatedly drawn upon in the data around grief and loss as well.

Post 6 (direct quotes not possible as searchable) described the experience of loss as one of missing their mother’s voice, their mother’s laugh, their mother’s perfume and their mother’s hugs. The depiction of the relationship through the senses – sight, sounds, smell, and touch – functioned to “make sense” of the embodied experience of being mothered. Along with the literal references to physicality, metaphorical use of the “heart” as the experiential centre of the mother-child relationship was also dominant across the posts. References to feelings of being “heartbroken” or having one’s heart go out to the grieving poster were numerous. The embodied relationship was threaded through the comments to the posts as well. In response to Post 6, for instance,

someone had included an image of one hand holding another – one young, one old – making visible the physical connection. As was the case for Post 2, we would argue, this served to reinscribe emotional connectedness and intimacy and substantiate mothering in particularly familiar, recognisable and traditional ways.

Post 7: Time. Along with the attention to the physicality of the experience, one of the central threads within the posts was the recognition of the passing of time as a point of reflection. This reflection was presented as a recognition of absence, and social media was used to share this passing of time with others. This recognition did not make it easier for the individual but served rather as a display of continuity and community. The online environment provided a space for shared grief, with the awareness of the difficulty of finding this community offline.

The vast majority of the posts included images – sometimes images of the mothers themselves, old family pictures, or even pictures taken of mementos of childhood memories connecting the person with their mother. For instance, one post included an image of a teddy bear kept from the mother’s childhood set in front of a cushion with the word “Love”.

Post:

it’s been 10 years since I lost her to cancer ... This is her Teddy Bear from when she was a little girl.. A mother’s love can never be replaced.

Here counter-posing the time of their loss, 10 years, with “never” being able to replace a mother’s love, brings into focus the enduring nature of the relationship. Time also provided a discursive referent and most of the comments that followed began with the number of years since they had lost their own mother ... 30 years, 41 years, 9 years, etc. The attention to time, however, was never related to the age of the mother, the focus rather served to corroborate the acceptability of feeling grief or mourning for extended periods. Across the posts, complex emotions were described around the passing of time and absence.

This theme of grief and loss in the data underscores the critical role of the mother in how children, particularly adult children, make sense of their own experiences. The relational focus of the discourse, around sympathy/empathy, embodiment, and time, make explicit the primacy and permanence of the mother and mothering, even in her absence.

Care (& COVID)

The third theme identified in relation to the construction of mothers and mothering in our data drew on traditionally gendered discourses of care. It should be noted that whilst all three themes were present across the data sets, it was inevitable that the COVID-19 pandemic would have an impact on posting in 2020. The effect was most notable in the third theme. The first element of this theme, Care, was common in each data set, it became markedly more common in the third year where it was most often presented in relation to the pandemic context. For this reason we added “& COVID” in parentheses. For the purposes of illustrating this theme we draw particularly on this most recent data.

As noted above, in most countries Mother's Day falls in May. However, for the UK, where Mothering Sunday is in March, the first lockdown was implemented just a few days beforehand and many plans had to be altered at the last minute. The posts about Mother's Day became intertwined with those about COVID-19 as, for the vast majority of people, it meant that they would be separated from their extended families. As mentioned earlier, we were initially surprised to find that the sentiment analysis indicated the language in the 2020 data set included more positive words than the previous datasets in spite of being located in a context of adversity. For instance, one post stated "1st Mother's Day not spending it with my mum which has killed me! But we have to look on the bright side that we are in a temporary situation". Rather than focus on the adversity, this was presented as a backdrop against which the re-creation of those mother-child links took place.

Posts 8 & 9: Caring. In Posts 8 and 9 two daughters speak to distance, the context and the "hug".

Post 8:

Happy Mother's Day, we dropped some food off to my mum's on Friday, and Jason's mum on Saturday stayed outside to maintain the 3 meters distance, felt rather strange not to give them a hug and kiss as you would do normally, but given that they are both over 70s and have been self-isolating for a week now did not want to risk it.

Post 9:

Today we have tried to have a lovely Mother's Day despite not being able to see my mum and everything that is going on. Wishing you a happy Mother's Day and sending you all a big massive virtual hug.

In these extracts, the posters are careful to make their adherence to social distancing rules explicit. In the posts from 2020, embodiment continued to be prioritised with attention to the loss of physical displays of care ("hug and kiss") through enforced separation. However, in many of these posts, constitution of care was inverted – from mother-child to child-mother. The focus was on how adult children organised to protect their mothers from harm by managing the risk of COVID. This inversion is particularly interesting in relation to the ageing mother and how this becomes conceptualised.

Generally, as we have discussed, the mother as caregiver has much cultural currency – so much so that the two terms are often used interchangeably. Much of the literature around intensive mothering takes the all-caring mother as a given. As Hays (1996) has argued: "there is an underlying assumption (of intensive mothering) that the child absolutely requires consistent nurture by a single primary caretaker and that the mother is the best person for the job" (p. 8). Yet, we were surprised to find that whilst descriptions of caring were plentiful in the data, the word "care" itself was rarely used. The posts and comments, as mentioned above, most often presented positive engagements with the challenging wider context.

Post 10: Intimacy. This tendency to put a positive spin on the context was achieved through constructions of intimacy as well as through discourses of care. As with the

posts about grief and loss, the COVID posts included descriptions of longing for the absent mother-child intimacy. Wong-Villacres and Bardzell (2011) have argued, based on their research into families separated by migration, that one way in which this intimacy can be established in technologically mediated communications was through the expression of shared experience. In Post 10 (direct quotes not possible as searchable), a daughter explained how she speaks to her mother every day but that on this day, Mother's Day, the mother's voice is different. As we have described before, posts often made reference to their mother's voice longingly. However, unlike those typical of the theme of "Grief & loss", this statement is not one of lament. It is an appeal to shared experience, with the "strangers brought together" online, an experience which is explicitly referred to as "nice". Thus, this theme does not carry the weight or gravitas of "Grief & loss" but rather the positivity of connection in the face of adversity through the construction of intimacy.

Hence, these descriptions around longing are positioned as explicitly positive. This is not to say that situations are not difficult, and that people are not missing their loved ones, but the focus was on the evanescence of the context and the management of these temporary challenges (as they were understood at the time). Labelling these situations as temporary provided an underlying sense of hope throughout the posts – something to be shared with others. This sharing of temporary loss can be contrasted with the permanence in the posts around grief and loss.

The importance of both care and intimacy, across the dataset, to the experience of being mothered became much more prominent in the final year in which the external context became more challenging. However, consistently, the construction of care and intimacy drew on similar themes around the physicality and relationality through which mothering was constructed.

Conceptual threads

Throughout the discussion of these main themes we have observed three conceptual threads that function to underpin the constructions of mothering in this dataset: materiality, relationality, and time. We saw through the extracts how the physicality of mothers, including in terms of familial similarity, the embodiment of emotion though (lack of) touch, and the lament for physical and geographical distance served to produce mothering as reliant on the material. Similarly, the relational aspects of mothering were integral to how mothers were made visible, definitely with respect to the well-evidenced role of caring, but also through the sharing of the emotionally meaningful and the production of intimacy. Finally, we were able to track how time, as a means of measurement (e.g., aging, passing, length, briefness), was used to constitute good mothering as capable of vanquishing temporal restraints.

Through the three themes, underpinned by these conceptual threads, we have argued that the texts draws on the affordances of social media platforms, to constitute mothering in very normative ways, and even whilst celebratory in nature, often reliant on notions of "good mothering" that allow for the problematic aspects of intensive mothering which have taken the foreground in our current neoliberal context.

Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed three themes: “Beauty & biology”, “Grief & loss” and “Care (& COVID)”, linked by three conceptual threads, which responded to the research question we put to the data: *How are mothers represented and how is mothering constructed in Instagram and Twitter posts on the occasion of Mother’s Day?* In this way, we were able to evidence how engagements with social media platforms centred around a specific event designed to celebrate motherhood can serve to reinforce normative notions, as well as validate specific forms of mothering. These normative constructions of mothering in the differing themes bring attention to the specific gendered practices not just of mothering, but also of those relational aspects of being mothered, such as the focus on physicality and care.

We struggled with some of the methodological limitations of this study. In particular, as we have mentioned, we had no access to the algorithms being used by Instagram or Twitter, though there is reason to believe that these changed year on year. This reflects a broader variability in online interfaces that any longitudinal study of this type will need to grapple with. Within these limitations, however, we aimed to keep our sampling strategy transparent and systematic and believe that we have done so sufficiently to make the data a meaningful representation of the broader population of posts. It has also been a challenge to present what is publicly available text in a way that retains meaning and protects confidentiality. We agreed for the purposes of this paper to only include quotes for those posts that were no longer searchable.

Based on our analysis we have argued that SNS allowed for sensemaking in a way that other mediums do not, for instance through the use of and physical positioning within photos, the use of emojis, post/comment structure, and most productively in the discussion of sympathy and empathy in the theme “Grief & loss”. With the growth of social media platforms in recent years, a huge amount of relational work is now done online and the affordances of these sites facilitate shared productions that are resonant with, but different to, everyday offline practice. So, we would argue that not only does social media provide a means of expanding or enhancing offline life, it also provides novel and productive spaces for making sense of our experiences of mothering and being mothered. However, we would draw attention to the way it can also serve to intensify problematic constructions of gender that may be embedded within otherwise positive and celebratory messaging.

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