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## **A space of one's own: spatial and identity liminality in an online community of mothers**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the role of an online community in the life of 11 Taiwanese women living in the UK and considers the implications this empirical case has for theorising about motherhood and the spatial dimensions of online/onsite space. Findings from a netnographic and ethnographic fieldwork show how online discussions reflect and amplify the liminal identities of the community's members. In looking at doing mothering at a collective rather than at the individual level, this study highlights how collective practices of consumption perpetuate liminal identities, exacerbating consumers' sense of being out of place. It shows how online space is at the same time the product of online and onsite liminal identities and liminal social interactions and the re-producer of such interactions.

### *Summary statement of contribution*

This paper contributes to the scant literature investigating the spatial aspects of online community. It rebalances the assumption of an imagined static and de-localised online community, with the idea of online communities as grounded in their geographical and cultural context. The paper advances our understanding of liminality and mothering showing how immigrant mothers do experience liminality as a fluid process rather than a well-defined set of thresholds to overcome.

**Key words:** liminality, mothering, acculturation, online community, ethnography, netnography

## **Introduction**

In this paper we study the role of an online community in the everyday life of 11 Taiwanese women living in the UK and consider the implications this empirical case has for theorising about motherhood and the spatial dimensions of online/onsite space. In consumer studies a commonly accepted definition of online communities is offered by Kozinets (1999, p. 254) who defines them as ‘affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities’. Scholars often refer to the spatial elements of online communities as places in the cyberspace (Kozinets 2010). For example, Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2002, pp. 410–411) pointed out how online community ‘as a place might be a slippery and an unimaginary notion for those outside of it, but to those insiders, it is a solid place in their hearts and souls’. In an attempt to understand what ‘solid place’ means in an online community for its members, consumer studies have shown how these communities are “places” of belonging, information, and emotional support that people cannot do without’ (Kozinets 2010, p. 15). Online communities have been celebrated as spaces overcoming geographical distance and contrasting with individual isolation and marginalisation caused by postmodernity (Breitsohl, Kunz & David Dowell 2015; Cova & Cova 2002; Maffessoli 1996). They have often been described as spaces liberating consumers from traditional forms of affiliation (including family, neighbourhood, profession, ethnicity, gender and age) and allowing people to create more fluid and de-localised affiliations around their consumption interests (Cova & Cova 2002; Croft 2013). Despite these celebratory claims, the spatial dimensions of online communities and their implications for the identity of members still remain surprisingly uncharted by marketing scholars. As such, Kozinets’ (2010, p. 15) previously mentioned claim that online communities are “places” of belonging’ has not been fully investigated.

We seek to understand this claim by analysing an online community of 11 Taiwanese women living in the UK discussing their everyday experiences of doing (mix-race) family and doing mothering in a host country. We adopt a netnographic and ethnographic approach to investigate the complex online and onsite spatial dimensions of this community and we use liminality as a sensitising theoretical lens to unpack such complexity. Findings show how the online discussions reflect and amplify the liminal identities of the community's members. The online and onsite manifestation of this community has analogies with a *communitas* wherein women create an artificial and temporary egalitarian and empowering space for discussing mothering in their own terms. Such an empowering space is particularly relevant for women experiencing isolation and marginalisation in their onsite realities. It is used more as a practical device for women with a higher social and economic capital. In looking at mothering in a host country at a collective rather than at the individual level, this study highlights how collective practices of consumption can perpetuate liminal identities. It shows how consuming this online and onsite space rather than helping women to overcome their identity thresholds through a fruitful darkness (Cody 2012), can create a permanent liminal darkness exacerbating their sense of being out of place. In fact this community is characterised by a space which reflects the onsite liminality experienced by these women and re-produces and perpetuates it both online and onsite. Theoretically the paper advances our understanding of liminality and mothering showing how immigrant mothers do experience liminality as a fluid process rather than a well-defined set of thresholds to overcome. This research also enriches our understanding of the spatial dimensions of online communities rebalancing the assumption of online space being disconnected to onsite realities, showing how online communities can also be grounded in their geographical and cultural context.

## **Spatiality in online communities**

Interpretive consumer studies have highlighted that spatiality is of significance in understanding consumption, since space is a constituent of discourses and practices of consumption (see, for example, Miller & Slater 2001). Moreover, these studies have highlighted how consumption practices are not simply located in space, but also produce space, and a particular experience of it (Hamilton & Hewer 2010; Johnstone 2012). As Leander and Sheehy (2004, p. 1) point out, ‘space is a product and process of social interaction. Space is not static ... space is a noun, must be reconceived as an active, relational verb.’ Empirical studies looking at the space in online communities confirm and extend Leander and Sheehy’s intuition, highlighting how the nature of social interactions produces spatiality (Davis 2010), but is also moulded by the ‘space constructed through networked technologies’ (Boyd 2011, p. 39). In other words, the spatiality of online communities is at once a product of and a producer of social relations.

Existing studies looking at online community and mothering have mainly studied this space as a product of online social interactions (Davis 2010; Philips & Broderick 2014). From these studies it emerges that these communities can become spaces of escape from everyday life, as well as spaces of entertainment (Davis 2010; Madge & O’Connor 2006). Similarly, Pedersen and Smithson (2013) show how an online community can be less a space of support and intimacy, and more a space of entertaining, and of aggressive and opinionated debates on parenting and gender. Thus these online communities can be spaces wherein mothers’ identities are redefined by mothers themselves, providing an interruption from the (offline) dominant ideologies of mothering (Madge & O’Connor 2006; Pedersen & Smithson 2013; Philips and Broderick 2014).

Despite providing an in-depth understanding of the relationship between collective identity and online spatiality, these works have been criticised for their incomplete understanding of the experience of online communities in people's everyday life (Dholakia & Reyes 2013; Hinton & Hjorth 2013). Indeed, they have been accused of seeing online communities as a world apart, underestimating the way they can affect the everyday and offline lives of their members. As such it has been argued that there is a need to 'de-emphasise the virtual and emphasise the connectedness of activities both online and offline' (Hinton & Hjorth 2013, p. 39). This is particularly relevant considering that social media are now constantly accessible through different types of devices, and as a result 'being online' anywhere and anytime is taken for granted by most of us (Marchant & O'Donohoe 2014; Richardson 2011). Some have highlighted that such technological evolution has changed the spatial dimension of online communities, creating spaces that 'are not entirely online, since they are fundamentally rooted in geographical space, but neither are they entirely offline – they sit somewhere in between' (Hinton & Hjorth 2013, p. 125).

We use the concept of space liminality in order to understand how the borders of online and offline space are blurred. If sociological studies have attempted to theorise how offline and online space is merged to some degree (see for example Hinton & Hjorth 2013), consumer research studies have neglected this crucial aspect of online communities (although see Dholakia & Reyes 2013). We seek to address this gap using liminality to unpack the role of an online community in the everyday life of 11 Taiwanese women in the UK. We use this concept to investigate the online community under study, as a product of gendered social relations about mothering in a host country and also as a re-producer of gendered relations in online and onsite contexts. Given the centrality of liminality, in the next sections we will discuss it in its original theorisation and its current application in consumer studies.

## **Liminality and space**

The term liminality was originally conceptualised as a state of instability and of being out of space and out of time. It was first introduced by Arnold Van Gennep (1909, [1960]) in *Les rites de passages*. He defines these rituals as processes characterised by changes of place, state, social position and age. These processes consist of three stages including separation (preliminal), transition (liminal) and reintegration (post-liminal). If during the phase of separation individuals are separated from their previous way of living, during the transition phase individuals are in movement from one social world to another. Uncertainty and precarious identities are experienced by individuals in the liminal stage, as they are navigating from one state to another and they are between two different worlds, or ways of living. Such instability is overcome during integration, the last phase, wherein individuals enter a new way of living and adopt a stable new identity.

The concept of liminality was popularised by Turner (1967) in his *The forest of symbols*, wherein liminality is described as a ritual of transition in which individuals are ‘neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, conventions and ceremonial’ (Turner 1967, p. 94). Individuals in a liminality state are ambiguous, ‘since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and position in cultural space’ (Turner 1967, p. 94). Individuals in liminal stage elude classifications that locate them in a specific social place in a given society, as such their status of being in between is characterised by uncertainties, social invisibility, and exclusion. Considered ambiguous and outside existing classifications, individuals in liminal space may be removed from society and taken to remote places wherein the ritual of passage needs to be performed before reintegration into society, with a new, solid and ‘clear’ identity. Turner offers examples of remote places outside villages where puberty rites are practised on boys and girls before they return to the village as men or women. Once

reintegrated in societies with a clear and newly formed identity, individuals no longer suffer from anxieties and uncertainties typical of their previous liminal state.

In its initial theorisation liminality was mainly a collective experience, although, as we will see in the next section, this aspect has been partly neglected in consumer studies. Individuals in the liminal state tend to establish egalitarian relationships based on solidarity and comradeship, which Turner terms 'communitas'. According to Turner (1967), communitas is a particular modality of social relations characterised by the absence of ranking, class and other social structures that are present in community, which he defines as an area of common living. Communitas is a temporary phenomenon that lasts until neophytes change their state and are reintegrated into society with a clear and stable identity. Back in society they will be classified into the structures of their community and they will no longer be members of the communitas. Communitas and community have, then, a dialectic relationship since community is only temporarily abandoned, individuals returning to it are revitalised by the egalitarian experience of communitas.

In his later work Turner (1974) shows the applicability of liminality in contemporary societies. Coining the term liminoid or liminal-like, Turner refers to current examples of liminality in modern societies including festivals, carnivals and artistic performances. These spaces of interruption of the working life represent some of the characteristics of liminality as originally conceptualised. Liminal-like experiences are characterised by a less rigid progression between statuses, as individuals can voluntarily access, leave and re-access them. Nevertheless they maintain many characteristics of liminality including the sense of being out of place, being outside classified categories and experiencing a communitas. This less structural conceptualisation of liminality has proved to be a useful concept to understand liminality in everyday life. For example, in their study of the garage, Hirschman, Ruvio and Belk (2012) adopt a less structural view of liminality for unpacking the complexities of a

space wherein past and future selves are objectified through forgotten, broken or even unused objects. Also the garage is a space wherein wider family relations are manifested, as this is a male dominated space clearly separated from other domestic spaces dominated by women. Taking inspiration from this study looking at the garage both as a product and a re-producer of gendered relations, we will look at how an online space on liminal mothering reflects and affects the mothering identity of its members. As we will highlight in the next section, others have studied mothering and liminality, but the spatial aspects of liminality and motherhood have not been fully investigated.

### **Liminality and mothering**

Until recently liminality has attracted scant attention in consumer research studies. It was introduced by Schouten (1991) in the nineties to understand consumers' navigation between different stages of being while undertaking plastic surgery treatments. Objects play a significant role in this process as they help consumers to materialise their new identities and overcome their sense of insecurity and being in-between. Schouten's admission of our limited understanding of liminality and his call for further research on this topic did not attract much attention. In fact, in their study on women empty-nesters Hogg, Curasi and Maclaran (2004) show the relevance of liminality in understanding these mothers' sense of ambivalence for their new stage of family life. However this study does not fully investigate the links between liminality and motherhood.

More recently liminality has remade its appearance as a central theoretical tool in consumer studies looking at tweens (Cody & Lawlor 2011; Cody 2012) and first time mothers (Olge,



Tyner & Schofield-Tomschin, 2013; the Voice 2010; Thomsen & Sørensen 2006). Similarly to the aforementioned studies on life transitions, studies on liminality argue that possessions become more central for consumers' unstable identity. In particular they highlight how

*For those whose sense of self is ambiguous, vague or blurred by the experience of standing mid-way between two socially acknowledged, symbolically loaded social market segments or spheres of interaction, belonging to neither, but embedded in both, consumption practices take on a new meaning, a divergent one (Cody & Lawlor 2011: 211).*

In investigating the divergent meanings that consumption practices assume during liminality, Cody & Lawlor (2011) conclude that possessions help tweens in overcoming the anxiety and uncertainties of their being in-between status. Tweens undergo a phase of 'fruitful darkness' wherein their daily experiences of 'suspended identities' are solved with strategic consumption practices that 'ready them for progression across their threshold' (Cody 2012: 61). Studies on first time mothers show less positive results, highlighting how the intensive level of consumption during pregnancy exacerbates insecurities caused by the ambiguity of being in between status (The Voice group 2010; Thomsen & Sørensen 2006). Thomsen and Sørensen (2006) coined the expression 'consumption caused liminality' highlighting how the in-betweenness is exacerbated by products and brands symbolising aspects of the previous and future self. Examples of these products include prams (Thomsen & Sørensen 2006) and maternity dresses (Olge, Tyner & Schofield-Tomschin, 2013). Similarly Banister and Hogg (2006) argue that expectant mothers engage in or avoid consumption activities, with objects representing hopes and fears for their future ideal selves.

In reviewing this literature we can comfortably affirm that Schouten's (1991) claim that we know very little about liminality, has been partly readdressed in consumer research. However this growing interest in the study of liminality has mainly understood identity as a structural

and hierarchical process consisting of many ‘identity thresholds’ to overcome. In this process of ‘identity by steps’ objects are used as vessels to go through different stages represented by extraordinary events (weddings, births, divorces). Given this prevailing assumption, it is not surprising to note that the existing studies have looked at liminality mainly in its first phase, transition, arguing that uncertainties and anxieties disappear once this phase ends. As Thomsen and Sørensen (2006, p. 921) point out

*Once the transition process into motherhood is finished, and the consumer has constructed a suitable and comfortable motherhood identity, she can rely less strongly on the symbolic meaning of the pram to support any such identity construction.*

Without denying the importance of such a structural way of looking at liminal motherhood as a phase that simply ends with the birth of the child, some have highlighted that liminality is often a more complex rather than a linear process (Hirschman et al. 2012; Philips & Broderick, 2014). As Philips and Broderick (2014, p. 1040) highlight, liminality is more an “ongoing identity adaptation in motherhood’ wherein the reincorporation phase is indeed a crucial, albeit neglected, aspect of motherhood. This way of looking at motherhood as a ‘less linear articulation of the liminal phase’ (Philips & Broderick, 2014, p. 1052) is particularly relevant for immigrant mothers who may experience a different liminality during their mothering. As Olge, Tyner and Schofield-Tomschin, (2013) and Philips and Broderick (2014) highlight, very little has been said about ‘other’ mothers who may experience liminality differently.

This paper seeks to propose a more inclusive way of looking at mothering, investigating the experiences of Taiwanese women dealing with the challenges of doing and displaying mothering in a host country. We do so by looking at how these women talk about their experiences of doing mothering – reintegration phase in Turner’s term – in their own online

community. In investigating this neglected phase of the liminal process we adopt a less individual-based approach of mothering and liminality, by looking at the collective experience of a these women reflecting on their daily mothering practices. The collective aspect of liminality has been overlooked in the literature, where individual experiences have been adopted as the unit of analysis. This overemphasis on the individual versus the collective aspects seems to be at odds with the original conceptualisation of liminality in which the creation of a *communitas* was a central aspect for the neophytes.

## **Research methods**

Combining nethnographic and ethnographic methods was particularly appropriate for understanding participants' experience of their community space. Together they constitute an optimum for obtaining an in-depth understanding of the community under study. However, the chance to combine nethnographic and ethnographic approaches is usually rare, since members are often anonymous and thus very difficult to reach (Kozinets 2002). Unusual and privileged access was obtained since the second author is a member of this community. Researchers do investigate the community that they are part of, providing an in-depth and rich understanding that would be difficult to obtain otherwise (see, for example, Madge & O'Connor 2006). Elsewhere we are going to reflect on the epistemological implications of this research process, but here it is noteworthy to highlight that the second author is a marginal member of this community, interacting sporadically with these women, and as such could be described as a lurker (Kozinets 2010). Ethical approval was obtained by the university where both authors were based at the time of the fieldwork. After having received this approval, the second author obtained the consent of all members who, openly revealing

their identity to other members, also agreed to being interviewed and observed online and offline. Following the ethical procedures common in social sciences, participants were informed of the nature and aim of this study and could withdraw at any time. All members gave their consent for being observed online and onsite.

The online and onsite fieldwork consists of various stages. The nethnographic stage of the study consists of participants' observations of the discussions and dynamics of the online community from September 2010 to August 2012. A content and thematic analysis of the visual and textual data collected from the online observations follows the guidelines for qualitative research (Kozinets 2002; Silverman 2006; Spiggle 1994). Online interactions, which took place in Mandarin Chinese, were analysed in the original language and subsequently translated into English. This primary stage of the research was followed by an ethnographic study combining participants' observations of three offline annual gatherings of the community (October 2010, October 2011 and October 2012) and two small domestic gatherings in spring 2012. A visual and textual diary was used by the first author for recording the gatherings. Semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author with 11 active members of the community followed the observations. Interview topics include participants' everyday life in the UK, their practices of mothering, their use of Plurk (see below), and their experience of the community in its online and offline manifestations. Interviews, conducted in English, were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Given the vast and rich nature of our data collection, a selection amongst the various data sets was necessary and hence data from the content analysis and the various gatherings has not been used in this paper. Also, data from the thematic analysis used in this paper is related to

the same period over which the interviews were conducted (from October 2011 to February 2012). Given that the paper aims at establishing links between members' online and offline experiences, participants' online behaviour pre- and post-interview was not considered. Acknowledging that the online behaviour of members changes significantly over time (Kim 2000), netnographic and ethnographic investigation aims at understanding members' involvement in the community over a given period of time. Although this constitutes a limitation in our research design, it is an established practice in netnographic studies (Kozinets 2010; de Valck, van Bruggen & Wierenga 2009).

The community interacts through short messages (text, videos, emoticons) posted in a micro-blogging service known as Plurk. Plurk is particularly popular in East Asia, especially amongst users in Taiwan, because it offers a wide selection of emoticons – graphic representations of facial expressions, such as head-nodding and smiles. Emoticons are frequently used by the Taiwanese to remedy the lack of non-verbal cues during computer-mediated communications (Chen, Lin, Shih, Hsu & Hsu, 2010). The community under study consists of 52 members. Most of them are Taiwanese immigrants based in the UK, some of them based in Europe and a couple in the US. Amongst the 52 members, 11 participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The small number of participants is justified by the nature of this study, which, following the tradition of interpretive consumer research, develops 'a more in-depth analysis of the life stories expressed by a relatively small number of participants' (Thompson 1996, p. 392).

Participants consist of 11 members of the community, all of whom are based in the UK (see Table 1). The length of their residence in the UK varies, with the shortest being 6 years and

the longest 20 years. The majority of our participants are in their mid-thirties. Apart from one, they have all achieved degree-level education. Seven of the participants are stay-at-home mothers; two have part-time jobs, and two have full-time occupations (one of them at professional level). Participants are all in stable relationships. Seven of them are married to British husbands, with other spouses comprising a German, a South African, a Taiwanese and a New Zealander. With two exceptions, the participants are mothers of small children (aged from 1 to 7). Both non-mothers expressed desire for maternity and are very much engaged in the discussions about motherhood. Participants' place of residence varies considerably. Some of them live in the London area, whilst others live in other parts of the UK, including the Midlands, the north and the south east.

**Table 1. Participants' profile**

Name and age	Length of residence in the UK	Education	Household income	Occupation	Demographic description	Place of residence
Amy, 39	9 years	Master	Medium	Stay-at-home mother	Married to British husband, with two children (8 and 5 years old)	South east (urban area)
Candy, 34	11 years	Master	Medium	Full-time school administrator	Engaged, British fiancé, with no children	South west (urban area)
Jennifer, 37	7 years	Diploma	Low	Stay-at-home mother	Married to British husband, with 2 children (14 and 2 years old)	Midlands (rural area)

Katherine, 32	7 years	Master	Medium	Part-time administrator	Married to British husband, with one child (1 year old )	Surrey (suburbia)
Liz, 35	8 years	PhD	High	Stay-at-home mother	Married to American husband with one child (2 years old)	Greater London
Mary, 36	10 years	Master	High	Part-time hotel clerk	Married to British husband with twins (5 years old)	North east (urban area)
Molly, 40	13 years	Master	Low	Stay-at-home mother	Married to British husband, with 2 children (4-year-old twins)	Midlands (urban area)
Primrose, 40	20 years	Master	Low	Stay-at-home mother	Married to American husband with three children (7, 4 and 2 years old )	Midlands (rural area)
Rose, 36	8 years	Master	High	Stay-at-home mother	Married to British husband, with two children (4 and 2 years old)	Greater London
Sue, 39	6 years	Bachelor	Low	Stay-at-home mother	Married to British husband, with 2 children (5 and 2 years old)	Midlands (rural area)

Victoria, 32	6 years	PhD	High	Full-time academic	Married to French husband, planning to have children	Midlands (rural area)
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Data collected from the ethnographic and nethnographic studies was triangulated in order to provide a systematic and critical account of participants' experience of their community (Shoham 2004). Also data analysis and interpretation were triangulated amongst the authors (Silverman 2006). The final interpretation results from a continuous back and forth between individual and joint interpretations and a continuous back and forth between the literature and the data analysis (Wallendorf & Belk 1989). Beneficial for the interpretation of the data was the fact that both authors are immigrants living in the UK, and one author, being a Taiwanese mother married to a non-Taiwanese husband, is very familiar with the issues discussed in the community under study.

## **Findings**

In this section we will unpack the spatial dimensions of Plurk, showing how it is a product reflecting the liminal identity of its members and it is also a producer of liminality, facilitating the emergence of a *communitas*, such as an insulated and temporary egalitarian space for discussing ethnic mothering. Plurk also re-creates liminality being at the same time an empowering and isolating interstitial space in members' online and onsite realities.

### ***Space as a product of liminality: Experimenting with different ethnic mothering***

Mothering is often a written script embedded in a cultural ideology which is manifested through fixed narratives and practices anchored in time and space (Miller 2005). If mothering is a cultural performance often reproducing exiting norms and conventions (de Vault 1991), participants highlight that caring for a child away from the home country is 'hard work',

characterised by uncertainties and dilemmas since norms from home cannot always be applied in the host country.

*When Mike was born I did not know anything about child care in this country. I have no idea of what services I could access, where I could go and ask. Nothing! (Amy)*

*All my family is in Taiwan, I am the only one abroad. My mum was very helpful when Mark was born. She came and stay with us for a month ... When you are on your own everything looks bigger and harder! I could not rely on my mum, and some of the things people do back home are considered not good here, like punishing your children. Mums are much stricter back home and children are very polite. The English style is to give to the children a lot of freedom, I don't. My children do not talk back; they do not give me attitudes. I do not agree with the children over here who can go out and do what they think, they want to do that and parents do not have any control over that. (Primrose)*

Participants' sense of hard work and their insecurity are not simply characterised by the already documented immigrants' 'emotional work involved in establishing new social networks, the stresses of learning how to be a consumer in the new locale, and small pleasures of established routines as well as familiar surroundings and products' (Thompson & Thambyah 1999, p. 221), but, as Primrose says, by the shock of witnessing a different way of mothering and the difficulties of applying a Taiwanese way of mothering in the host country. Amy remembers feeling 'out of place' during the first few months of her pregnancy and after

the birth of her child, and she remembers the difficulties of conveying such a feeling to her English husband and her parents and friends in Taiwan. This sense of being in between different ways of mothering and being unable to verbalise such a feeling with family members in the UK and in Taiwan, remind us the sense of isolation and invisibility common to the neophytes described by Turner (1967).

In analysing the discussions hosted on Plurk, it emerges how this space reflects its members' onsite insecurity and uncertainties of how to do mothering. Firstly Plurk seems to help women overcome their sense of isolation. As Victoria says 'you feel normal, you feel that your problems are also other people's problems, and you are not so strange at the end of the day'. If others (Davis 2010) have highlighted how online community create a supportive space to escape everyday life in a host country, our participants define their community as 'a source of practical knowledge' for solving their mundane dilemmas as mothers and wives away from their own country. As Primrose says:

*People share where you can get bargains, when you can get particular kind of food, Taiwanese ingredients ... the other day we learnt about the child tax credit ... People tend to share, which is quite nice, lot of them are news really connected to your life. I found this really useful ... Lots of them can cook quite well and they are married to British husbands so that's why I ask them about some common recipes. Sometime you need to know the [cooking] technique ... but people, the real people, they try to help, it is a real help. Sometime even question about education I can just go and ask 'What do I do?' and people will throw an idea at me which is very useful.*

In solving their everyday dilemmas of mothering away from home participants do not simply discuss how to maintain their own culture – as suggested by other studies including Mehra, Merkel & Peterson-Bishop, 2004; Penaloza 1994; Sinclair 2009 – but they discuss how to articulate their sense of being in between by creating a new set of performances navigating amongst different acculturation outcomes (including maintaining the home culture, integrating both cultures or resisting the host culture (see Berry 1997)). Therefore this space becomes a space wherein new rules, conventions and interpretations of doing Taiwanese in the UK can be experimented. As the neophytes described by Turner (1967), these women can create new enactments of themselves combining new and old understanding of motherhood. For example, feeding the children and taking care of their health is mainly framed as a matter of maintaining Taiwanese ways of mothering. In fact discussions on how to use some Taiwanese remedies in cases of a bad cold, or how to plan, cook, display and serve a Taiwanese meal are very common. For example, Primrose posts her Taiwanese-style dinner:

*Look at what I cooked tonight; the sea bream is cooked in the traditional way ... I've fried the fish with a lot more oil than before. If I don't use more oil, the fish skin will come off and not look so nice ... 😊*



**Figure 1: Primrose's dinner**

After reading her post, May replies:

*Wow, lovely fish for the family to eat! 🍴 They are so lucky to have you cooking them Taiwanese dishes every day. I've run out of ideas to cook for my children now. Any advice? I would like them to eat healthy as well having a variety of diets, including both Taiwanese and British dishes? 🤔*

And Cindy posts:

*Wow, this is such 'mum' food! I can almost smell it, as if my mum cooked them when I was little*

Primrose replies:

*I've even made Taiwanese pickled vegetables myself (12<sup>th</sup> October, 2011)*

Maintaining a Taiwanese way of cooking is not practised through cookbooks, websites or advice from families and friends in Taiwan, but mainly through Plurk. As a learning space

‘commodified’ to members’ own conditions of immigrants with non-Taiwanese husbands, Plurk helps them navigate the difficulties of balancing their family diet with Taiwanese and British dishes. Maybe it is because ‘cooking online’ is a shared learning process amongst equals (de Valck *et al.* 2009), that these words of advice are conveyed with enthusiasm, creating the hyper-celebratory tone of these discussions. In fact, the mundane event of cooking a sea bass in a ‘traditional’ way is an event that members want to share and celebrate with others. The sense of pride in making it, evident in Primrose’s announcement, is accompanied by Mary and Angel’s congratulatory remarks. This emphasis also reminds us of the hyperculture identity outcome (Askegaard, Arnould & Kjeldgaard 2005), in which immigrants do not simply maintain their ethnic culture practices, but they adhere to them with much more passion than non-immigrants in the home country. This is indeed the case for our Taiwanese women, who learn how to perform a Taiwanese way of mothering through a collective investment of their time, labour and energy, and celebrate this learning process with an enthusiasm that they would not have in their home country.

As participants’ learning process does not happen in a cultural vacuum, the everyday practices of mothering are inevitably adapted to the new cultural context, generating a resistance to it, but also an integration of the cultures. As the previous dialogue between Primrose and Mary shows, Mary is concerned with balancing the two culinary cultures in her everyday meals. Other common examples are discussions on how to substitute some unavailable ingredients to make a Taiwanese dish, how to deal with a ‘fussy child’ who does not like some Taiwanese snacks, as well as how to teach Mandarin to the children. As the dialogue below shows, these discussions have a very supportive tone, since women are guiding each other in mothering, dealing with new and challenging events not experienced by their own mothers and friends in Taiwan.

Molly: *The twins are asking a lot of questions now. I guess soon I will struggle with questions about British history, churches and castles. I do not think I can answer any of those.*

Sue: *I guess I would say, I'm not British, you go ask your dad!* 🙄

Primrose: *Exactly! I say this quite a bit! Go ask your dad. I can only speak Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese dialects, I don't know about the others...*

Sue: *I've already made an agreement with my husband; this kind of questions will be his to answer!* 😏 (10<sup>th</sup> November 2011)

In sharing their solutions as to how to deal with the challenge of being unable to help their children with their homework, these women attempt to redefine their mothering roles in their household and try out other ways of mothering never experienced before. If mothering is a perpetuation of a narrative with limited possibilities of changing what can be said and done (Miller 2005), these women redefine this narrative on the basis of their liminal identity of immigrant mothers constantly re-defining their motherhood. As the literature says, the prevalent narrative on mothering makes women morally accountable for putting the children first (authors own publication) and for sacrificing themselves for their families (de Vault 1991). In the present case, women seem to partly liberate themselves from such a limited narrative by renegotiating their mothering role in relation to the host culture, and to other members of the family. In fact, in redefining their role as mothers, they also redefine the role of their husbands, making them accountable for some aspects of this mothering practice (for example, doing the homework with the children). As we will discuss later, this is not a case of jeopardising existing gender and power relations in the home, since putting the children

first is framed as a woman's domain. Despite redefining mothers' roles within existing narratives of gender and power relations, these discussions show women's concerns and some of their actions in terms of negotiating the existing distribution of responsibilities and tasks in the household (see Sullivan 2004).

Plurk is a safe place for verbalising feelings, ideas and understandings of such negotiation processes. If previous studies highlight how women tend to select and polish idealised aspects of their mothering practices to be shared in online communities (Cheung 2000), here we see that women tend to share their perceived inadequacies and difficulties of being liminal mothers as well as their domestic successes. We think that such a balanced narrative is due to the fact that these women feel understood in this space in discussing matters unfamiliar to Taiwanese women in Taiwan. As Primrose says:

*If someone talks to a friend who is in Taiwan and has a different life from us, would not understand why you are arguing around chopstick and fork and knife. To us we can totally rely on that. I cannot say that makes me feel more Taiwanese but remind us who we are and I would always say stick to who you are and hold your chopstick! (laughing) don't give up.*

Plurk helps women to try out different enactments of their motherhood, navigating amongst different acculturation outcomes (i.e. discussing episodes of maintaining their ethnic identity, integrating the two cultures or resisting the host culture). By selecting particular events – episodes of their life that need to be shared, discussed and analysed collectively – they reinforce their collective identity, their sense of 'we' (Muniz & O'Guin 2001). We do not



know if these discussions lead to changes in these women's onsite realities, but we can observe that this space enables 'the possibility of competing, contradictory and sometimes transgressive performances of motherhood to occur' (Madge & O'Connor 2005, p. 91) and the possibility of reformulating alternative versions of their identity as mothers and wives in the UK.

### ***Space as a re-producer of liminality: Communitas***

Plurk has similarities with Turner's (1967, 1969) concept of communitas. As previously mentioned communitas is a particular way of living that neophytes experience during their liminal stage. The identity of the neophytes, or members of the communitas, is defined by their transitional state, and by the suppression of any characteristics of their individual identity beyond the communitas. Thus they appear to be very similar, as all other aspects of their identities are temporarily suspended. Interestingly, all members of Plurk tend to define themselves and their group in egalitarian terms, highlighting common aspects of their collective identity. As Victoria says:

*We are friends because we are from Taiwan, we are immigrants in the UK and also married with husbands from different nationalities ... I will not be friend with most of these women in Taiwan. Some are housewives, from different part of the country and much older than me. I do not expect them to really understand or being able to sympathise the problems at my specific work environment ... Here, we are all similar as we are Taiwanese in the UK, but back home everybody is Taiwanese. You are not friend with someone just because they are Taiwanese in Taiwan (laughing)*

This definition reveals an implicit understanding of members' collective identity as Taiwanese women in the UK. If online communities are characterised by a hierarchy which contributes to perpetuating a strong collective identity and a shared ethos (Muniz & O'Guin 2001), on Plurk there is almost an absence of hierarchical divisions, although as we will see in the next section, members have a different level of commitment to this community. In fact, aspects that could potentially create divisions (such as professional activities, education, social class, place of residence and religion) are omitted in this definition. Similarly, discussion that could lead to demonstrating a higher competence in mothering practices is discouraged and avoided.

The equalitarian spirit amongst members has resonance with Turner's (1969) concept of neophyte whose other identity aspects are suspended during the liminal state, wherein he/she is equal with the others. Victoria places herself at the same level as all the other members, since all of them are experiencing anxieties, isolation and marginalisation given their conditions as immigrants, wives and mothers. It is interesting to note how the neophyte concept would not be applicable if these women were in Taiwan. As Victoria points out, they would not be friends there, as in their home country they would not be neophytes and, as such, other aspects of their identity (age, occupation, geographical provenance, and perhaps social class) would re-emerge, creating differences and social distance amongst them.

Similarly, the thematic analysis of online discussions reveals a surprising implicit understanding of the legitimate topics of conversation. Such understanding has been previously highlighted in the literature, which shows how such conventions emerge from disagreements and a constant reproaching of offenders (McLaughlin, Osborne, & Smith 1995; Kim 2000). Whilst previous works (Muniz & O'Guin 2001; de Valck *et al.* 2009)

suggest how both similarities and differences are celebrated in order to create a sense of collective identity, in Plurk we have not seen disagreements, arguments or animated discussions, which, as the literature says, could lead to members abandoning the community or the establishment of new rules and conventions (see McLaughlin, Osborne, & Smith 1995; Kim 200). Here we witness a general hyper-celebratory tone in relation to the mundane and everyday aspects of mothering. This is not to say that these women do not face difficulties and anxieties, some of which have been illustrated in the previous section, but simply that Plurk is characterised by an implicit agreement to avoid or censure topics that could possibly lead to disagreements and open confrontation. This is confirmed by Amy:

*Sometimes you do have to think about what you're going to put on there. You don't want to offend some people ... I wouldn't talk about politics with my Taiwanese friends. And we tend to have quite different points of view. I mean, I'm just much more towards the left than I know most of my Taiwanese friends are much more right-wingers. And I'm kind of thinking, well, it's too tricky to talk about that now. I don't want to get into an argument*

If the literature highlights how the anonymity of the online community can result in animated and aggressive discussions (Pedersen & Smithson 2013), in our case, members know each other and meet up regularly at social gatherings; thus discussions tend to maintain the formality of offline conversations, where open confrontation is not always encouraged. The emphasis on the common aspects of the members' identity results in a perpetuation of a limited narrative of (ethnic) mothering, emphasising only the aspects common to all participants (see also Mehra *et al.* 2004). The perpetuation of this selective narrative and

elements common to the group is probably the main cause of a strong sense of ethos and professed comradeship, echoing Turner's *communitas*, wherein members are temporarily living in the absence of structural divisions and show a high level of support and kinship.

Members do recognise the particular nature of their relations and the intimacy of the conversation in Plurk. In fact some of them admit that such intimate topics are not shared in other communities such as Facebook, where a wider audience is admitted.

*I have Plurk and Facebook. But I separate them a lot. On Plurk I don't accept everyone as a friend; it's more private and selective. I will only be friends with people I really know. On Plurk I do say how I feel. If I am not happy about my boyfriend or I complain about him, I won't do it on Facebook, as Facebook is more open. I have lots of common friends, acquaintances, colleagues on my Facebook. So I don't really say that much on Facebook. But I do share my true feelings on Plurk because I tend to keep Plurk a more private area in my life. (Candy)*

The selective nature of Plurk allows members to share intimate aspects of their domestic lives that could not be shared with a heterogeneous audience, such as families living in Taiwan, British and international colleagues and friends. This does not simply confirm the existing literature, highlighting how online communities based on gender and ethnicity are empowering resources for users (Koerber 2001; Lopez 2009), but it also shows how members can swap between different communities, displaying different aspects of their identities and disclosing the most intimate ones only in spaces considered safe and supportive.

### *Interstitial spatiality and the blurring of online and onsite realities*

Turner's (1967) account of the neophytes does not provide any description of their roles and involvements in the *communitas*. It seems that all neophytes enthusiastically engage with the practices established in the *communitas*. On the contrary, the literature on online communities highlights how members' involvement in online communities varies in relation to their interest in the discussed consumption activity and the intensity of their social relationships with other members (de Valck *et al.* 2009; Kozinets 1999, 2010). In line with this last literature, our findings show that participants' involvement in the community's online and onsite manifestations varies considerably and, as such, their everyday experience with this liminal space can be very different. Despite being a supportive space embedded in all members' everyday lives, participants' involvement varies significantly in relation to their onsite context and their lifestyle.

Take, for example, the case of Liz, an upper-middle-class full-time mother who lives in central London with her husband, a bank analyst, and her three-year-old son. Having decided to interrupt her academic career in a prestigious university in the UK, she describes her lifestyle as 'a busy mum with a rich social life'. With her son she attends various play groups and classes, becoming friends with other 'international mums like me'. She is also a member of various online communities, like that of the alumni of the university where she graduated. She is very active in all these communities, which she accesses constantly via her phone. Plurk is one of these communities, described as 'a source of practical knowledge'. As she says:

*It is a learning device about how behaviour problems of your child should be controlled, eating and things like that. I found it more resourceful than reading books. Plurk is about real time, books are ... you can use these books as a dictionary, but sometimes I feel that if I look at people's experiences in more detail ... With the Taiwanese mums we are focussed and more in depth. That's why it's more useful.*

For Liz, Plurk is a learning space for acquiring information targeted to her specific problems; hence she accesses the space in the same way she would consult a dictionary providing ad hoc information in 'real time', as she puts it. Similarly Rose, another member living in London, relies on Plurk for 'certain types of information' that she cannot obtain from her local network. Whilst she can obtain information about 'local things' through the mothers she met at antenatal classes, for 'Taiwanese things' she relies on Plurk. Rose admits accessing this space when her Taiwanese identity becomes more prevalent in some events of her domestic life, including having her mother-in-law visiting.

*Rose: Oh my god, I'm going to come back to Plurk for the next two weeks. My mother-in-law is around. It is not safe to use Facebook anymore, as I always post things on Facebook in English. She will be able to read them then! 😬*

*Primrose: Oh well, welcome back! 😊 (1<sup>st</sup> February, 2012)*

Unable to share her feelings with her network of local mothers and other online communities, Rose sees in Plurk a safe and private place wherein support can be obtained almost 'on demand' and for as long as the demand lasts. For Liz and Rose, Plurk is a space they can step into when their liminal Taiwanese identity becomes prominent, perhaps creating uncertainties

and discomforts that cannot be shared and solved with their local networks. For both of these women Plurk is not a support replacing onsite support and connections (see Diskell & Lyon 2002); rather it is a support supplementing their existing networks, and hence enriching their social and cultural capital.

Women with a less prominent social capital than Liz and Rose tend to rely more on Plurk. Victoria considers Plurk a safe place wherein to take refuge from some of the difficulties of her everyday life. Living in a rural area in the Midlands and having a very demanding job at the local hospital, she describes her social life as very lonely. For Victoria, Plurk is her everyday safe place, accessible in the evenings after having returned home from work.

*Plurk is kind of safe place where you can say what you want to say. Normally I tell them what my day is, because I cannot share it with my colleagues, and my husband is not here all the time. I use it when I want to complain about my husband. I like Plurk because you can talk to people in a regular way...I think for daily life it is good having someone with whom you can share things and you know they do not have any kind of benefit in doing it. It is not ...there is nothing behind it so you do not have to worry about that. It is just you and your friends. (Victoria)*

For Liz and Rose, Plurk is a space to access sporadically and on particular occasions, wherein their Taiwanese identity becomes prominent, for Victoria, Plurk is part of her mundane and perhaps lonely evenings when she is at home without her husband. Having a lower social capital than Rose and Liz, and living in a rural area described as a 'boring place with a very small international community', Victoria has fewer opportunities to increase her social

networks and as such relies more on her online network based on her ethnic identity. This is not to say that Victoria shows a lower level of acculturation, simply that she does not seem to have many opportunities to develop her social capital in her local context. As such she relies on Plurk not simply to obtain the support unavailable locally, as in the case of Liz and Rose, but to temporarily disconnect herself from the local context and to reconnect to a community where she can share the difficulties generated by her feelings of isolation and marginalisation (see Parker & Song 2009). The case of Victoria is thus different from the escapism experience of the Indian women in Davis' (2010) study. In fact, if these Indian women escape their everyday realities through the sharing of melancholic memories of their childhood and youth in India, then Victoria and other women living in rural areas do rely on Plurk to escape their realities – but they do so by sharing their present difficulties rather than their nostalgic past.

For a group of full-time mothers, Plurk provides a way to hold onto Taiwanese ways of mothering in a host country (maintaining the ethnic culture and resisting the host culture, in Berry's (1980, 1997) terms). For Primrose and other stay-at-home mothers living in the countryside, with a predominantly white English population, Plurk is their main resource for social and cultural capital. Being disconnected from their local communities, these women rely on Plurk not simply for acquiring ad hoc information on how to perform Taiwanese mothering in their local context, but for establishing an onsite network of Taiwanese mothers. Being a Taiwanese mother seems to be the dominant element of their identity, which they practise and discuss on Plurk daily. As Primrose says:

*I am a full-time mother sitting at home, all I deal with, it's just kids, kids, kids. I do not talk about politics, I talk about food and education, yes, mostly these topics really*



*... Because I am at home all the time I feel I live in a very Taiwanese style. My dearest friends are the Taiwanese mums on Plurk ... Even my father reckons that I should adapt more, and cook my children more English food so they do not have to supply me with all the Taiwanese ingredients on a monthly basis ... There is not much going on around here! Without Plurk I would feel very lonely ...*

Feeling marginalised or even excluded by the local community ('there is not much going on here'), these women find in Plurk an empowering space for members who often do not possess social resources for improving their social capital (Mehra *et al.* 2004). As Primrose says, this is a space wherein they 'can speak up', talking about mothering in their own terms and extending their Taiwanese lifestyle outside their own kitchens, connecting to other Taiwanese women in the UK with whom they share a sense of isolation. These women tend to be constantly in contact through Plurk, but also via telephone and face-to-face visits. Those within driving distance of one another tend to meet regularly, organising formal and informal gatherings. The exclusive nature of the relationships between these women constitutes almost a small, bonded, community within a community. As Molly says:

*We treat each other like sisters, like family. We see each other regularly at each other places. The children play together and we cook some food and drink tea ... The mothers at the primary school are polite with me, but they never invite me in their conversations. At the school gate I listen to them and I hardly talk. With the Taiwanese mums I can be myself, I can talk and say what I think.*

Feeling herself excluded at the school gate, Molly finds in the online and onsite manifestations of Plurk a way of ‘being myself’ and thus expressing her own (maybe different) ideas, rather than simply listening to the dominant ones.

## **Discussion**

Through the lens of liminality, this study unpacks the complexity of online and offline space in a community of women discussing mothering in a host country. In doing so, the study looks at the online environment as a product reflecting gendered social relations experienced online and onsite, as well as being a re-producer of gendered discourses, and indeed social relations. Findings reveal how Plurk as a collective consumption experience of women in a liminal identity state, creates a liminal space. Indeed it is a liminal space not simply because it reflects the liminal conditions of its members, but because it re-produces such liminality online and onsite.

Plurk is a collective space wherein women’s condition of mothering in a host country is questioned, problematized, resisted, celebrated and often solved. This is not done through abstract discussions of how to do mothering, but through discussions aiming at solving the everyday dilemmas of doing and displaying mothering in the UK. What we observe is that this space facilitates a collective process of creating a repertoire of past, present, and future enactments of the self, which enables women to discuss and reflect upon the uncertainties of their liminal conditions. Indeed discussions are framed in a spatial context which is at the same time functional, transformative, empowering but also isolating, since it reflects and reproduces the marginalisation experienced by these women in their onsite realities.

Plurk is a functional space since it provides practical support for women isolated from the family of origin (see also Mehra *et al.* 2004; Madge & O'Connor 2006; Rothbaum *et al.* 2008) and not represented in the marketplace or in media discourses about mothering. Indeed it is a space used to navigate the everyday challenges caused by being a mother 'out of place', and thus having to constantly learn and readapt taken for granted mothering norms and assumptions in a different context. It is through such a collective re-adaptation that Plurk becomes a transformative and empowering space since women can experiment with performances of mothering, fabricating a repertoire of new and onsite-based gender enactments combining home and host culture. Similarly to the *communitas* in which neophytes would experience a new "free and experimental region of culture, a region where not only new elements but also new combinatory rules may be introduced" (Turner 1979, p.28), Plurk is a normative space transforming mothering norms and conventions. Through Plurk women establish norms on how to make dinner, dealing with children's homework and arguing with their husbands over the use of cutlery. Thus Plurk is a normative empowering space wherein women can temporarily relocate themselves outside their environment and land in an interstitial space wherein they can virtually subvert the power relations usually faced in their working, as well as domestic, environment. If others have shown how online communities on motherhood do not necessarily alter members' onsite practices (Madge & O'Connor 2006), this study shows that Plurk is a transformative space wherein norms and practices of mothering are reshaped, combining different and often contrasting ideologies of doing mothering. Also through these discussions a resourceful set of performances – combining different traits of acculturation, including integration, resistance and maintenance (Berry 1997) - are discussed and approved by the *communitas*. Such discussions do not simply suggest how to solve unexpected problems, but they also construct a collective liminal identity of women who need to redefine their roles and identity in a new context and establish

their sense of entitlement toward the non-members of the *communitas*. Thus Plurk becomes a space wherein women can reflect on their identity re-establishing their sense of self through mundane incidents to be problematized, discussed and then solved collectively.

However, Plurk is not a space jeopardising existing power relations and norms in the home. Similarly to the neophytes of Turner (1967, p. 98) who returned to the village 'revitalised by their experience of *communitas*' but without the ambition to change the status quo of the village, our participants do not use Plurk as a space for feminist contestation. On the contrary, this is a space for coping with and solving everyday domestic dilemmas, without challenging the underpinning assumption that feeding the children and caring for the family is a woman's domain (de Vault 1991). Paradoxically, the intimate and exclusive nature of this space, which is accessible only to the Taiwanese women (as the *communitas* is accessible only to the neophytes), perpetuates some conditions of liminality including being invisible, feeling excluded and 'out of place', and feeling different. Being a bonding rather than a bridging space (see Norris 2009) inaccessible to relevant others, this space does not allow a conversation to be opened up to other relevant actors (fathers, other mothers, other family members), but remains an enclave in which members take refuge when needed. Whilst some members step out of this enclave every morning when they leave their home to go to work, for the more marginalised women the temporality of this space is extended to most of their day. In fact for them Plurk is not simply a spatial and temporal interruption of their isolation as full-time mothers living in white-dominated villages, but is also a way of recreating a world apart in their local environment. As such, the liminality of Plurk is extended in time and space, since it becomes a parallel world in which these marginalised women, stepping out of it only occasionally, since it is a safe, reassuring and empowering space. Therefore the empowerment that the more marginalised members find in Plurk paradoxically 'deepens'

their sense of being out of place rather than ‘solving’ it, since it exacerbates their online and onsite isolation.

Whilst studies on motherhood and liminality ( Olge et al. 2013 ; Thomsen & Sørensen 2006) tend to see the post-liminal phase as an unproblematic stage of doing mothering (although see Philips & Broderick 2014), this study has shown how mothers are not like Turner’s neophytes who return to the village with a new and stable identity. Our findings have shown how liminality does not end with an exceptional event - the birth of a child - but that it is a more complex and gradual process which for some could remain as a permanent condition. In fact, for our participants liminality, as being in-between and doing mothering across cultures, is a latent, albeit permanent condition, that manifests itself during mundane practices including confronting a partner over the use of the cutlery or dealing with challenging homework. For these women liminality is indeed a condition that they face every time a new and unexpected event interrupts their mothering routine, questioning their ways of doing and displaying mothering. Therefore, rather than seeing motherhood as an identity based on thresholds to overcome, this study sees motherhood more as a fluid process wherein uncertainties and anxieties are not solved once the transition stage ends, but are rather perpetuated, albeit by different degrees, over time. If anxieties could be caused by the particular conditions of our participants of being constantly in between different spaces of mothering, then the current literature on intensive mothering (Faircloth 2014) tells us that women are constantly learning how to display good mothering to themselves and to others and that is putting women in the constant state of uncertainties and anxieties, typical of the liminal state.

In looking at the role of consumption in the everyday lives of these women, this study partly confirms the previous works (Bannister & Hogg 2006; Olge et al. 2013 ; Thomsen & Sørensen 2006) highlighting how consuming becomes a central activity for individuals

experiencing liminality. If studies affirm how consumption can at the same time solve and aggravate the sense of being suspended and being out of place (The Voice 2010), such suspension seems to be solved by a ‘fruitful darkness’ in which strategic consumption practices can help neophytes to progress through their thresholds (Cody 2012). This is indeed the case of women individually consuming maternity dresses (Olge et al. 2013) and prams (Thomsen & Sørensen 2006), both objects materialising and solving their identity conflict. However consuming Plurk does not help women passing through thresholds since their sense of being in between is more a permanent than a transitory condition. Plurk is a collective consumption experience which represents a more permanent, albeit often latent, darkness that is reinforced by its very communal nature. Being a space collectively constructed around the condition of liminality, Plurk does not represent a place of fruitful darkness since it often amplifies and exacerbates the sense of being in-between. Whilst practical solutions are found to avoid family arguments over the use of cutlery, Plurk does not encourage discussions beyond the contingencies in which liminality is practically manifested, and as such it does not provide a space for a fruitful darkness, but simply a space wherein darkness remains an unspoken topic with no space for discussion.

## **Conclusions**

This paper contributes to the scant literature investigating the spatial aspects of online community. It has shown how online space is at the same time the product of online and onsite liminal identities and liminal social interactions and the re-producer of such interactions. In doing so it rebalances the assumption of an imagined static and de-localised online community, with the idea of online communities as grounded in their geographical and cultural context. The paper shows how many of the current consumer research arguments

about online space are indeed static and do not fully represent the complexity of the interconnections between online and onsite space as experienced by community members. The paper has shown how online space is an interstitial space between online and onsite realities, and as such the onsite reality needs to be taken into account and investigated in order to understand the online community's dynamics, and identity discussion.

This paper also contributes to the current studies on liminality and consumption in three ways. It has shown the importance of looking at liminality also as a collective, rather than simply an individual-based experience. It also rebalances the existing overemphasis in interpretive consumer studies of liminality as an identity process by steps, showing how liminality is more a fluid process in which the post-liminal phase needs to be further studied. In looking at consumption practices of consumers experiencing liminality, this paper has shown how certain collective consumption practices shared with other liminal-like consumers can exacerbate the sense of being out of place and perpetuate their intermittent darkness both in the online and onsite experiences. As such, this study confirms the more alarming view of motherhood and consumption (The Voice 2010), arguing how consumption does not solve consumers' anxieties, but it rather aggravates them.

In providing a more inclusive way of looking at mothering as experienced by immigrants, this paper shows how liminality can be experienced differently by immigrant women. Although further research is required to fully understand the consumption practices of immigrant mothers, marketers willing to accommodate the unattended requests of these women should take inspiration from this study and consider more sensitive segmentation techniques to capture this neglected segment of the market. Also online marketers should consider this neglected market's segment in designing online (brand) communities dealing with families' domestic consumption.

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