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# Mummy Blogs and Representations of Motherhood: “Bad Mummies” and Their Readers

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**Kate Orton-Johnson**

## Abstract

Digital technologies have opened up new environments in which the experiences of motherhood and mothering are narrated and negotiated. Studies of “mummy blogs” have explored the ways in which blogs, as social media networks, can provide solace, support, and social capital for mothers. However, research has not addressed how mothers, as readers of blogs, use the mamasphere as a cultural site through which the identities and role of motherhood, and the mother–child relationship, are socially and digitally (re)constructed. This article focuses on confessional blogging of the “bad” or “slummy” mummy: blogs that share stories of boredom, frustration, and maternal deficiency while relishing the subversive status of the “bad” mummy. Drawing on understandings of social media as a space of social surveillance and networked publics, the article argues that in framing narratives of motherhood in terms of parental failure and a desperation for gin, “bad mummy” blogs collapse social contexts in important and interesting ways. Using an example of a conflict between two mummy bloggers, the article will reflect on the ways in which the digital terrain of motherhood can both liberate and constrain: a space for mothers to express and share frustrations and seek solidarity, a space of public condemnation and judgment, and a space that poses ethical issues in the digital curation of family life.

## Keywords

mummy blogs, digital representations, social surveillance

## Introduction

The proliferation of online representations of motherhood has shaped the cultural references and archetypes through which contemporary motherhood is produced and consumed. Mummy blogs, as a form of life writing, have emerged in the blogosphere as an important cultural phenomenon and are a lens through which we can reflect on contemporary constructions of motherhood. Blogs have provided spaces in which the experiences of mothering are represented, negotiated, and resisted. By challenging and reinterpreting traditional representations of motherhood, by giving voice to the private realm of motherhood, and by focusing on the maternal voice, mummy blogs, as a critical practice, enable more nuanced articulations of maternal identities (Friedman, 2013; Lopez, 2009). As such, mummy blogs have been positioned as tools of empowerment with the potential to democratize mainstream media narratives.

Studies of mummy blogs have explored the ways in which blogs, as social media networks, can provide venues for self-expression and tools for connecting with

others, creating structures of solace and support (Morrison, 2014). However, these same spaces are also sites of conflict where stories, identities, and practices of mothering are contested and redefined and where understandings of the privacy and (curated) presence of children in mummy blogs are problematized.

A growing body of research has mapped the ways in which the practice of blogging shapes social capital and collective identification, but largely absent from these accounts are understandings of the readers of the blogs and the meanings that they draw from online accounts of motherhood. There is a paucity of research that considers the ways in which the everyday practices and experiences of motherhood interact

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with representations of motherhood online. In the same way that Barthes (2001) argues that a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination, we can understand readers as an important part of the ways in which mothers are culturally and, I argue here, digitally constructed. Accordingly, this article makes a contribution to debates around mummy blogs as cultural representations of motherhood that shape the quotidian understandings of maternal identities.

This article focuses on reader responses to confessional blogging of the "bad" or "slummy" mummy: blogs that share stories of boredom, frustration, and maternal deficiency while relishing the subversive status of the bad mummy. Given the embedded, embodied, and everyday nature of the Internet (Hine, 2015), I draw on understandings of social media as spaces of networked publics (boyd, 2010) and social surveillance (Marwick, 2014) to argue that by framing narratives of motherhood in terms of parental failure and a desperation for wine, bad mummy blogs provide their readers with an important but contradictory resource.

Using an example of reader responses to a conflict between two mummy bloggers, the article will reflect on the ways in which the digital terrain of motherhood can both liberate and constrain: a space for mothers to express and share frustrations and seek solidarity and at the same time a space of public condemnation and judgment. As such, mummy blogs can be seen as cultural sites through which the identities and roles of motherhood and the mother-child relationship are socially and digitally (re)constructed.

## Cultural Representations of Motherhood

In Western culture, representations of motherhood have, historically, been complex, contested, and contradictory. Research has pointed to the ways in which beliefs and narratives about motherhood are inscribed and mediated via a heterogeneous range of social institutions, knowledge projects, cultural ideologies, and media platforms (Hall, 1998; Woodward, 2003). In particular, the notion of the "natural" mother, as essential, fulfilling, and biologically defined, has been unpacked across a wealth of literature that has explored the social, economic, and cultural construction(s) of motherhood and its intersections with issues of patriarchy, class, gender, and ethnicity.

Central to these debates have been the ways in which motherhood has been mythologized and mediated through popular culture (Kaplan, 2013; Woodward, 2003). In particular, the myth of the natural mother percolates as a gradual, multistage, and multimedia phenomenon (Hall, 1998). Ideals of motherhood are normalized, nebulous, and unspoken and serve to define socially acceptable roles that become embodied in the lived experiences of women (Green, 2012).

Contemporary articulations of motherhood are no less complex. As digital technologies open up new environments in which the experiences of motherhood and mothering are

narrated, online spaces have also become important domains through which stories, identities, and practices of mothering are contested and redefined. Mummy blogs provide what feminist scholars have defined as alternative spaces of resistance (Keller, 2012). Mummy bloggers take an active role in the construction of blogs as cultural texts and the democratizing nature of participation in Web 2.0 environments (Jenkins, 2006) mean that mummy blogs have the potential to provide more agentic and diverse representations of motherhood in what has been defined as the mamasphere (Friedman, 2013). While mummy bloggers represent a rather homogeneous and narrow demographic in terms of ethnicity, class, and sexuality, they are a non-normative voice that provides a more variegated picture of motherhood than offline mothering materials (O'Reilly, 2010). This is particularly interesting in the context of resistance to narratives of the natural mother, and a sub-genre of subversive mummy blogs has emerged that explicitly plays with the idea of bad and good mothers, enabling us to reconsider mainstream cultural constructions.

## Representations of the "Good" and "Bad" Mother

In their examination of representations of Western motherhood in the media, Douglas and Michaels (2005) point to the unrealistic and unattainable idealization of motherhood presented in mainstream cultural narratives of hypernatality (Douglas & Michaels, 2005) and "new momism" (Hays, 1998). Mothers are positioned as the primary caregivers, and successful motherhood requires relinquishing autonomy to a child-centered and idealized view of women and children that bears little relation to the realities of most mothers' everyday lives (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). Central to new momism is the notion of "intensive mothering," a romanticized and demanding ideology that emphasizes the need for mothers to spend a great deal of time, energy, and money on child rearing (Hays, 1998). Mothers are expected to place the needs and desires of their child above their own and to be satisfied and fulfilled by this role (Lee, 1997).

Aligned with debates about new momism and intensive mothering are the so-called "mummy wars" that divide stay at home mothers and working mothers into oversimplified rival categories (Green, 2012; Lopez, 2009; Peskowitz, 2005). Here, ideologies about maternal selflessness conflict with Western work-centered cultures resulting in a lose-lose situation for women who are emotionally, economically, and structurally placed between opposing ideological positions.<sup>1</sup> This ignores the diversity of mothers and their social contexts, creating oppositional groupings to be compared and judged.

Issues of judgment and comparison are also fore-fronted in contemporary debates that have explored the construction of "yummy" and "slummy" mummies as social archetypes (Littler, 2013). The yummy mummy, as a cultural descriptor, is used in popular discourse to symbolize a type of mother

who is sexually attractive and well groomed, bringing *glamour*, *attractiveness*, and *mother* together in ways that create new sets of practices and cultural scripts that mothers can aspire to (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010). With an emphasis on aesthetics, the yummy mummy represents the attainment of an idealized standard of looks and sexuality with practices of mothering mediated through conspicuous consumption (O'Donohoe, 2006).

In contrast, the slummy mummy is perceived as having "let herself go" and is excessive, slothful, and unfeminine (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010, p. 85). Douglas and Michaels (2005, p. 20) note that, traditionally, media representations of the "bad" mother tend to be African American women who disproportionately feature in stories about crack babies and single, teen, or welfare mothers. The slummy mummy is not constructed as morally bad in this sense; rather, in lacking a manicure, carrying baby weight, and struggling to balance work and children, they are failing to achieve the standards of the yummy mummy, but, importantly, are still revalidating them as a value system (Littler, 2013).

There are clear enactments of class boundaries and social capital in this labeling, and the archetypes of yummy and slummy mummy make moral and aesthetic judgments and distinctions. However, what is *also* at stake is an important shift away from narratives of intensive mothering that emphasize maternal self-sacrifice. In prioritizing the individualizing tendencies of a neoliberal model of desirable maternal femininity (Littler, 2013, p. 228), the yummy mummy represents a mother figure that has an identity that is not subordinate to her child. Similarly, in failing to meet these standards, the slummy mummy is also forefronting an identity outside that of "just" mother.

While literature around intensive parenting, new momism, mummy wars, and contemporary mother identities points to conflict around narratives of motherhood, it is important to remember that feminism has a long history of deconstructing media discourses (Hall, 1998). What is important in these debates is the role of the media in presenting stories of motherhood that transmit norms and values that come to be seen as natural rather than socially, economically, historically, and, I argue here, *technologically* constructed.

## Mummy Blogs and the Digital Construction of Motherhood

Mummy blogs provide us with new ways of thinking about the cultural construction of the identity of mother and can challenge mainstream representations of motherhood (Lopez, 2009). Mummy blogs, in documenting family life and in sharing experiences of motherhood, expose stories that, as a collective, have the potential to change deeply normative understandings of the identity of mother (Friedman, 2013).

Controversy about the nature of the mamasphere has dominated the emerging literature in this field, with "mummy

blogs" seen as a label that both complements and demeans (Lopez, 2009). They have been hailed as sites of female activism and rebellion in making the personal political and in making visible diverse, alternative, and candid narratives of motherhood (Petersen, 2015). However, they also reflect the gender politics conferred by the identity of mother and invoke well-established social and cultural judgments about mothers as "apron-clad sycophants to their tiny sovereigns" (Friedman & Calixte, 2011, p. 25).

What is not in question are the ways in which mummy blogs have created a wider public sphere in which motherhood is negotiated. Mummy blogs explore diverse representations of motherhood away from the social mores and expectations of face-to-face parenting culture and the persistence of cultural wars about women's roles in the home and at work (Nelson, 2010; Schoenebeck, 2013). In exposing mainstream media myths of motherhood, they have created digital social networks that provide solace, support, and social capital for mothers at a time of identity transformation (Friedman, 2013; Lopez, 2009; Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Moravec, 2011).

While much of the literature surrounding mummy blogs has emphasized the value of self-expression and collective identification for the blogger, less attention has been paid to the ways in which diverse representations of motherhood function for readers of blogs. Beyond the recognition that readers are able to eavesdrop on millions of mothers' experiences (Friedman, 2013), the impact of blogs and digital narratives of motherhood on the lived experience of mothers has largely been rendered invisible. This is consistent with the blogging literature more broadly where relatively little research has examined the readers of blogs (Baumer, Sueyoshi, & Tomlinson, 2011).

This is an important omission. The mamasphere comprises the visible voices of bloggers and commentators but is also made up of readers who interact with and engage with the blogs in their own (re)constructions and (re)productions of mothering. While mummy bloggers construct versions of their own motherhood, readers, in turn, reinterpret these constructions in reflections on their own mothering practices (Powell, 2010). It is these *reader* understandings and their implications for mummy blogs that this article focuses on.

## Methodology

To explore the ways in which mummy blogs are interpreted by their readers, the analysis presented here draws on data from a project on online representations of motherhood. Interviews were conducted with 32 mothers who regularly read mummy blogs. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via Skype, and all of the respondents participated in at least two interviews lasting around 45 min. The interviews included reading breaks where respondents directed me to particular blogs or blog posts that they wanted to discuss and the interviews were



frequently followed up by email exchanges with respondents sending links to blogs or posts that they thought I would find interesting or relevant.

Interviews were preceded by an exchange of emails and messages across a range of media, for example, via Facebook groups and messenger apps and through threaded comments on blog posts. This facilitated and accelerated contact and rapport (Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016).

All of the respondents were between the ages 28 and 45 years, White, and based in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. In part, this reflects the fact that White, married, heterosexual women dominate the voices of the mamasphere, but despite the homogeneity and limitations of this sample, in line with Lopez (2009), I argue that this at least provides a starting point for discussions about representations of motherhood in the blogosphere.

Interviews were transcribed and coded in NVivo using grounded theory techniques of open coding and memoing (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As the data were collected over a period of 2 years (2014–2016), each coding frame was guided by preliminary reviews of the data and was developed and refined inductively.

A dominant theme emerging from the interviews was the importance of humor in blogs. The most commonly read and popular type of blog among my sample was funny and confessional in tone, characterized by narratives of maternal failing, self-depreciation, and stories of embarrassing or horrible motherhood experiences. The appeal of an authentic and “real” presentation of motherhood was emphasized by respondents, and this led to an analytical focus on subversive mummy blogs that use sarcasm and facetiousness. As an illustrative example, this article draws on a set of blog posts that typify some of the key issues around the construction of motherhood in blogs and how they are understood and navigated by their readers. This specific example was selected as 28 of the women interviewed referred to this instance and directed me to these particular posts. They are interesting in three key ways: (1) they illustrate the interconnected nature of the mamasphere and challenge the narratives of mummy blogs as sites of solidarity, (2) they play with ideas about the identities of good and bad mothers, and (3) they raise important questions about the privacy, presence, and status of children as curated by their mothers.

### “You’re Kind of a Bitch of a Mom Blogger”

“Eeh bah Mum” is a blog written by Kirsty Smith, a 40-year-old married, White British woman with two children. The blog has been Blog of the Day and Blog of the Week on UK parenting websites Mumsnet and Netmums as well as a Tots 100 “Good Read.”<sup>2</sup> It is nominated in the “Brilliance in Blogging”<sup>3</sup> best writing category 2016, and the author

published a book from the blog, *How to Have a Baby and Not Lose Your Shit* in 2015.

The posts are humorous in tone, informal, and often self-depreciating in reflecting on the challenges of parenting. Many of the interview respondents named this blog as a regular and favorite read and cited it as a celebration and recognition of the challenges and complexities of motherhood. Indicative posts include “Baby led weaning—how to decorate with Weetabix,” “Is my son a Dick?,” and “Shit they don’t tell you about starting school.” The example I am drawing on for the purpose of this discussion is the post “To the lady who called me a bitch,” in which Smith writes,

I understand that my attitude to parenting is not shared by everyone . . . but I have to admit I was a bit disturbed to discover I was the main feature of a blog post titled “You’re Kind of a Bitch of a Mom Blogger” which I read whilst stuck at home with two sick children. Fun times!

The classic response would be to say “Hey lady you called me a bitch that kind of makes you a bitch too!” but I don’t know anything about this lady—she might be going through a tough time, maybe she’d been up all night with two sick children or perhaps she was just really, really struggling to find interesting things to write about in her blog.

But the main reason I’m not going to call her a bitch is because I just don’t think it’s a nice thing to do. Either in real life or on the Internet which is also part of real life. (Eeh Bah Mum, 2015)

To contextualize this post, Eeh Bah Mum writer Kirsty Smith had been a guest blogger on an American parenting website “Scary Mummy.” Scary Mummy started in 2008 and defines itself as an online parenting community emphasizing that “Parenting doesn’t have to be perfect.” Now acquired by media group *Some Spider*, it hosts writing from guest bloggers alongside parenting and lifestyle articles and a confessional section where one can anonymously post frustrations and anecdotes. In her guest post “‘Me Time’ is bullshit once you’re a mother” (Smith, 2014), Eeh Bah Mum writes about the ways in which “me time” changes once you have children:

Before I had children, I used to go to the hairdressers. This was known as “getting a haircut.” Now, I am a parent and I still go to the hairdressers, but this is considered “me time.” It’s essentially the same thing, but now the act of hair shortening is supposed to be some sort of treat . . . In Britain, we love reality shows like *The Only Way Is Essex* . . . which feature young, single people making terrible life decisions . . . The stars of these shows need “me” time to reflect on the many ways they have been wronged, told off, or generally “disrespected.” They can then use this time to arrange nights out where they can throw drinks in other people’s faces which is apparently the best way to regain respect should you ever find yourself being told off or disrespected.

I fear for these people when they have children.

Being a parent involves being told off and disrespected on an hourly basis. I have tried throwing drinks in my children's faces, but it is simply a waste of pinot noir.

So, as far as I'm concerned, as a mom you can stick your "me" time where I stick my children's art work—in the recycling bin. (Eeh Bah Mum, 2015)

In turn, this post was blogged about by US blogger Jessica Gottlieb, a married mother of two living in Los Angeles. Her blog was listed for 2 years as one of the Top 50 Mom Bloggers by online magazine *Babble*, and she was named a *Power Mom* by Nielson in 2008 and 2009 in their compilation of influential voices in the blogosphere based on a metric of blog posts and comments.<sup>4</sup> In response to Smith's "me time" post, Gottlieb blogged a post entitled "You're Kind of a Bitch of a Mom Blogger":

I haven't read Scary Mummy since it was a one woman website and I knew it was raw, who doesn't like raw? I didn't know that it was for bad mothers . . . the kind of mothers who really do need some parenting classes, some boundaries and maybe a chat with their own families.

For many paragraphs this was a cute and clever and relatable post and then this happened [*she relates the pinot noir comment*]

I have read and reread those sentences a couple of times but still my stomach sinks and there's ringing in my ears. Who thinks this? Who does this? I understand the need to be outrageous, it's how bloggers get page views or clicks. I understand hyperbole. I understand leaping straight to the ridiculous because you have little kids and little sleep and you feel like you've lost yourself and you want to be funny. This is not funny. If you're being disrespected every hour other things are going on . . . If you feel like throwing things at your children or if you feel like the image of someone throwing drinks in the faces of children (anybody really) is funny please see a therapist.

There is no part of me that is exaggerating. What you are experiencing is not normal parental behavior and you need help. (Gottlieb, 2015)

Gottlieb goes on to say that she admires Eeh Bah Mums blog and likes to get a second opinion when she is being critical of another parenting blog to ensure she has not misinterpreted anything. She quotes the second opinion received from her friend:

I asked my friend Heather Spohr<sup>5</sup> what she thought of the posts . . . more than once she's kept me in check. Here's what she had to say:

"Parenting little kids is a hard job. It's wonderful that we can blog about the harder parts of parenting and get instant support and camaraderie. What I don't understand is the name calling, or writing the things we'd never in a million years say to our children's faces, the names we'd never tolerate anyone else

calling them. Hyperbole is tempting but it comes at a price. The internet is forever—in ten years, when their kids find these posts and read the names their parents called them, I doubt they'll say, 'It's okay, Mom. I'm sure it got you a lot of pageviews' . . . If I had a friend who was writing about her son being a dick I'd end the friendship.

Your one year old baby isn't a dick but you're kind of a bitch. Stop it." (Gottlieb, 2015)

In her response to Gottlieb, Smith posted on her own Eeh Bah Mum blog drawing very explicitly on narratives of friendship and support:

If I had a friend who was writing about her son being a dick I'd pop round with biscuits (that's cookies to you Jess) and a shoulder to cry on.

I wouldn't write a reply online suggesting she's a bad mother who shouldn't be left alone with children because although I'm totally kind of a bitch I'm also all about supporting my sisters . . .

There is one thing Jessica wrote that I did find offensive, it's in her last line:

"Your one year old baby isn't a dick but you're kind of a bitch. Stop it."

Jessica I'll take being called a bitch and a bad mother but I'm afraid I'm not going to stop it. I love that blogging is giving mothers a voice even if it is not a voice I agree with. (Eeh Bah Mum, 2015)

Both sets of blog posts were followed by debates occurring through the comments sections which discussed, with vary degrees of civilly, cultural differences in humor and parenting, the etiquette of blogging about other blogs, and the ethics of making judgments about other parenting styles. The commenters, in tracing the interaction across the two blogs, cross-reference each blog in support or condemnation of the bloggers and their posts.

Discussion of this series of posts and the resulting debate in the comments sections of the blogs evoked strong reactions from my respondents, and the example poses interesting questions about the nature of identity and storytelling in a digital era. What is of analytical interest in the context of this article are the ways in which the readers of these blogs understood and navigated the conflict between the blogs. How does the mamasphere function for readers when the sharing of frustrations also becomes a space of public condemnation, judgment, and surveillance?

## Mummy Blogs and Social Surveillance

Blog communities, as with other technically mediated communities, are characterized by watching and an awareness of being watched (Marwick, 2012, p. 379).

While the role of technologies in surveillance has been well documented at a macro level, we also need to reflect critically on the ways in which social surveillance has created a set of practices through which surveillance *of* and *between* individuals is digitized and normalized through social media (Marwick, 2012, p. 379). This form of surveillance has been conceptualized as a collapse of context for social media users, who rely on an imagined audience (Litt & Hargittai, 2016) to manage their interactions with invisible, heterogeneous, and potentially large populations (boyd, 2010). For the respondents, as readers of mummy blogs, this social surveillance was explicitly discussed and highly valued. The ability to find out intimate, behind-the-scenes details about others' parenting, that they perceived as honest and open, was the primary reason for following subversive non-normative mummy blogs:

It's not a view you get anywhere else and it brings me joy and relief as a reader and I'm grateful that people are putting themselves on the line like that. (Helen)<sup>6</sup>

Readers described "stalking" or "spying" on other mothers via their blogs, despite the blogs being in the public domain. For the readers, the intimacy and detail of the blogs made reading them *feel* like permitted surveillance. This is a domestication of surveillance practices (Marwick, 2012) that has interesting implications for the role of mummy blogs in the cultural construction of motherhood. If the mamasphere is a space in which different versions of motherhood can be articulated, and traditional narratives of motherhood resisted, then the fact that social surveillance acts as a form of judgment problematizes a space that has purportedly democratized and diversified representations of motherhood. For Helen, this is articulated in terms of risk and mothers "putting themselves on the line" while other respondents voiced frustration at the ways in which the context collapse of social media left mummy bloggers open to the kinds of criticisms aimed at Eeh Bah Mum:

Of course it's inevitable that there is going to be flaming, especially if someone is saying the kinds of things [about motherhood] that Eh Bah Mum does, not that long ago you would only admit that to your closest friend. But it's also exhausting that in the one place where people can open up and talk about being a mother it comes down to criticism and misunderstanding, where is the mother solidarity? As a reader it makes me sad. (Anna)

The readers of the blogs are responding to the social surveillance that bloggers open themselves up to with concern and fear that these kinds of bloggers will be alienated by the judgments from other bloggers in the mamasphere and by the comments and responses from other mothers:

It's [Eh Bah Mum] a blog I read a lot, always dry, very well observed, I'm staggered that someone would misunderstand

this. It kind of makes me glad that I'm not putting myself out there [by blogging] and sad that we can't be more supportive of difference. I love to be able to read things like this and fear these voices will be gone if they are shouted down. (Louisa)

This is important because of the power that Marwick (2012) suggests social surveillance has: a power that exists in mundane day-to-day interactions, that flows through social relationships, and that takes place between individuals (p. 382). Citing gender norms as an example, Marwick (2012) argues that they are determined through interpersonal moments in and through which masculinity and femininity are reinforced, policed, or resisted (p. 383). Similarly, the power of mummy blogs to challenge, subvert, and resist mainstream narratives of motherhood is, for readers, undermined by the kind of social surveillance exemplified by the exchange between Eeh Bah Mum and Jessica Gottlieb. Here, the power of acts of social surveillance, between blogs and between readers and bloggers is meaningful. Mummy blogs monitor each other and readers monitor the blogs. This kind of mutual social surveillance creates an internalizing gaze that formulates what is normal, appropriate, and acceptable in that community. If we conceptualize mummy blogs as a community in which norms emerge *within and between* blogs that represents one level of social surveillance. The value of considering readers as participants, also actively engaged in the mamasphere, is in understanding a second level of social surveillance that goes beyond establishing norms for online behavior. Here, readers are active in using their reflections on blogs to (re)constitute norms and the limits of acceptability in *offline* mothering practices:

You read [blogs] and it gives different way of thinking about mothering than the usual advice that you get coming at you from everywhere and everyone. You think—oh ok—I do that too and that's ok. Sigh of relief. Of course people have different opinions but [blogs] are somewhere where we can be honest and get a whole load of different ideas . . . as a reader, if there is this battleground between blogs and someone is calling someone a bitch and telling them to stop blogging then it kind of undermines the whole idea of a different kind of message. I feel undermined in what I'm doing. (Laura)

Blogs are important sites through which cultural scripts of good and bad mother are resisted and interpreted. The context collapse and surveillance between individuals, characteristic of social media, became problematic for readers when the surveillance and conflict between bloggers resulted in the experiences articulated in the blogs being undermined, flamed, or challenged. Readers used blogs for reassurance and to help them manage often seemingly incompatible identity expectations, but this reader agency was challenged when mothers who did not conform faced negative judgment or even harassment from other users.

While Web 2.0 spaces have long been conceptualized and experienced as overlapping ecosystems in which information



is shared and produced and in which participants expect and desire to be watched and judged (Marwick, 2012, p. 380), the focus has been on “active” users of social media that engage in posting and public display. But these acts of surveillance also play out among readers of blogs who feel invested in the bloggers they follow and who are both surveying the practices of the bloggers and surveying the relationships and interconnections between bloggers:

It makes me think sometimes that maybe I shouldn't be paying any attention or getting confidence from some of the darker mum blogs that seem honest and true and then that just makes me feel alienated from reading. You assume that people reading these kinds of blogs are going to be on the same page, tired, looking for some humour about motherhood, linking from some other blog with the same kind of tone. Then you look at the comments and friction and realise that we're not a bunch of readers sharing any kind of solidarity and it becomes unpleasant. (Anna)

The interconnected space of Web 2.0 means readers follow blogs and comments and the social surveillance occurring creates a network in and through which bloggers can monitor and judge. For readers, the ability of bloggers to draw on this wider community, in condemnation, again undermined their sense of solidarity and engagement with the mamasphere. For example, referring to Gottlieb asking her friend Heather Spohr what she thought of the posts, one respondent commented as follows:

The idea that a grown woman is blogging “my friend agrees with me too” feels almost like some clique closing ranks in the most public and horrible way. What is the point of blogs that provoke if we're just going to fall back on the same old judgements of other mothers? (Nadia)

The kinds of exchanges exemplified in the Eeh Bah Mum/Gottlieb example demonstrate how inter-blog social surveillance challenges readers' perceptions of the blog as both a comforting and provocative voice. This has important implications. While the idea that people of relatively equal power are watching each other online and acting on the information they find is not a new one (Marwick, 2012), the replicable, persistent, searchable, and scalable nature of digital information has important implications for a second and somewhat contradictory theme that emerged from the analysis. This theme relates to privacy, the ethics of performing motherhood online, and the implications of the presence of children in blogs.

## Privacy, Performance, and Digital Memory

In Gottlieb's blog post, fellow blogger Spohr states, “The internet is forever—in ten years, when their kids find these posts and read the names their parents called them, I doubt they'll say, ‘It's okay, Mom. I'm sure it got you a lot of pageviews’” (Gottlieb, 2015). My respondents, in discussion

of these kinds of privacy concerns, articulated an important tension. Bad mummy blogs, in voicing less normative aspects of motherhood, provide readers with a sense of solidarity and relief, but at the same time readers feel torn by the digital visibility of these articulations. Social surveillance simultaneously opens up new representations of motherhood that readers value and embrace *and* raises concerns about privacy, the nature of surveillance, and the contradictory ethics of these kinds of representations:

I get that they are playing to the role they have created, the acerbic wit and the shock factor, but even while we get this as readers you have to wonder how it will be taken by other audiences—it's hard to say, “what if their children read this” without sounding just like the hysterical commentators that condemn them, but it has to be considered. (Katherine)

Respondents expressed conflicting feelings about the value and importance, for mothers and readers, of honest, raw, and reflexive presentations and performances of motherhood and how these may fit with an unknown future digital footprint and a perceived lack of agency and choice for the children featured. The social surveillance that they benefit from as readers is at the same time a surveillance that prompted misgivings about the visible and public nature of social media. In this sense, readers are concerned by what Kumar and Schoenebeck (2015) define as the responsibility of parents, as privacy stewards, to decide what is appropriate to share about their children online, a stewardship complicated by a lack of audience control and boundary turbulence (Petronio, 2002):

It's a double-edged sword. I think what they are doing is great, to find relief, laugh, recognise myself. But I think that loss of control over where your story goes and who talks about you is scary and there is no way I would open myself or my family up to that, I would be mortified if someone called me a bitch mom online and that was public and forever there . . . for my kids to see. I struggle with the fact that something so private is being made so public without really knowing what that means and how can we know, how can we decide what is ok when even mummy bloggers can't agree on what is ok to post? (Laura)

This plays into long-standing debates about the relationship between mother and child and the importance placed on the self-sacrifice inherent in the mother identity (Morrison, 2011). By blogging, mothers are giving themselves and their readers a voice, but concerns about potential harm to a child or the mother-child relationship collapses this voice back into narratives of acceptable conduct for a “good” mother.

So, contradictory ideas about liberation are coupled with uncertainty about the nature of online data and the implications of making family life and children visible. For readers, the complex ethics of this further frustrates feelings about the judgments embedded in practices of social surveillance:



Who knows if the internet is forever? And who knows if this child will even care. It frustrates me because for once here is someone that is openly talking about being a parent, and what happens? You get the whole privacy thing to mask the fact they are just judging other mothers and how they use blogs to express themselves. (Simone)

In defaulting to critiques and debates about privacy and the rights of the child, the readers felt that the bloggers they engage with may be denied the space in which freedom of expression could have the opportunity to democratize and open up debates about the nature of motherhood. The readers also recognized and highlighted the inconsistency and hypocrisy of these ethical judgments and pointed to the lack of ethical concern about mainstream, culturally acceptable representations of good motherhood online:

In a sea of social media where everything is presented as perfect, pictures of lovely family events and wholesome family mealtimes, no one cares about privacy there—but mention a tired parent and a glass of wine and suddenly being online is going to damage your child and family? (Jessica)

Leaver (2015) argues that the ways in which children are published online has been largely absent from literature around social media. Much research has focused on the practices and risks of young people's online presence (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010), but there has been little attention paid to the implications of parents sharing personal information about their children online (Ammari, Kumar, Lampe, & Schoenebeck, 2015).

Blogs complicate ideas of child privacy by providing spaces for mothers to foreground their identity as an individual rather than “just” a mother (Gibson & Hanson, 2013; Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). In challenging mainstream narratives of the good mother, bad mummy blogs face critiques that they are curating their children in ways that may be problematic, undesirable, or unethical. Readers want to hear stories of frustration and failure and welcome blogs as spaces in which these stories can be told. At the same time, in reflecting on the kinds of conflict outlined in the example above, they fear that the public nature of these narratives and the implications of these (future) publics may not be ethically worth their emancipatory potential.

In this sense, the contradictions experienced by readers of these mummy blogs as they navigate issues of privacy and agency are exemplars of the transition and flux occurring in our understandings of contemporary privacy in networked publics (boyd, 2010).

## Conclusion: The Meaning of Mummy Blogs?

In the context of readers of mummy blogs, the concepts of social surveillance and networked publics enable us to think about blogs as spaces in which the surveillance occurring of

and between individuals creates both tension and relief. Rather than focusing on *speaking to* and *managing* invisible audiences, networked publics, and collapsed contexts (boyd, 2010; Marwick, 2012, 2014), a focus on readers makes visible the practical ways that networked media is used.

Readers monitor voices that they find comforting and provocative and value blogs as a foil through which to reflect on their own mothering practices. The subversive humor employed in the blogs blurs public and private boundaries for readers and makes visible shared foibles and failings. At the same time, readers feel uncomfortable about the public, networked, and exposed nature of these voices and feel undermined when they are challenged. Humor can serve as a unique key for understanding social and cultural processes (Shifman, 2007), and the misunderstanding of humor, as outlined in the example here, points to the ways in which mummy blogs represent a conflicted digital terrain where identities of motherhood are negotiated and navigated.

While much of the scholarly focus on mummy blogging has been on the blogger themselves and the performative benefits of digital life writing, it is also important to include the readers of these blogs as part of the *mamasphere*. Blogs are part of a wider multimedia and multimodal landscape, and, as Hine (2015) argues, being online occurs alongside and complements other ways of being and acting in the world. The ways in which we interact with the Internet are embedded in multiple frames of meaning, motherhood being one. As such, *readers* of blogs also experience the kinds of transformative impacts and effects that have been shown by research to shape and define bloggers identities as mothers.

Focusing on the ways in which readers use blogs to interpret and navigate their own experiences points to the ways in which mothers actively engage with stories of motherhood in contextualizing their own experiences and understandings of their own maternal identity. Instances of conflict, as in the Eeh Bah Mum/Gottlieb example, highlight the tensions and contradictions inherent in the use of blogs as a space for bloggers *and* readers to navigate the uncertainties of motherhood.

While blogs are commonly positioned as potentially transformative spaces for new articulations of motherhood, the tensions expressed by the readers suggest that they may in fact serve as *another* platform in which articulations and struggles around long-held normative ideas about the nature, identity, and role of motherhood are being reinforced and reified.

This is particularly important in our emerging understandings of the ethics and implications of the presence of infants in online networks and the potential consequences of the digital curation of family life. If blogging is a space in which mothers can resist mainstream narratives of material sacrifice, how do concerns over privacy and rights of deletion for children impact the emancipatory potential of these platforms? The complexities and implications of a

searchable cultural memory (Jones, 2016) are unknown, and, as subjects of blogs, children may have little power or participation in their digital identity. Given the potential for scalability, visibility, and persistence in digital spaces (boyd, 2010), does the cathartic need for mothers to express and engage with new maternal identities conflict with the right of their infants to decide on and define their own online presence and identity?

Mummy blogs represent a contradictory but important middle ground between structural and cultural representations of motherhood and between interpersonal relationships and individual choice. They also represent spaces of ethical uncertainty and risk. In making visible and sharing the messy reality of motherhood, bad mummy blogs have shaped what is acceptable to divulge in a networked public. In engaging with and supporting these narratives, their readers are also implicated and complicit.

To understand contemporary digital mediations of motherhood and the mother-child relationship, these kinds of boundary and ethical issues that underpin mummy blogs need our critical attention.

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### Notes

1. It is important to acknowledge that this refers to a homogenizing Western bias that does not recognize the intersections of class, ethnicity, and structural inequalities that shape the experience of mothering.
2. Tots 100 is a network hosting 8,500 UK parent blogs.
3. The Brilliance in Blogging (BiBs) awards are hosted on the website BritMums which is a United Kingdom's collective of lifestyle bloggers that runs an annual social media awards program.
4. [http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online\\_mobile/social-media-comes-of-age-blackshaw-reflects-on-marketing-and-the-web-in-2008/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/social-media-comes-of-age-blackshaw-reflects-on-marketing-and-the-web-in-2008/) and [http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/nielsen\\_powermoms.pdf](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/nielsen_powermoms.pdf).
5. Mummy blogger and author of blog *The Spohrs Are multiplying*, <http://thespohrsaremultiplying.com/>.
6. Respondent pseudonyms are used throughout.

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