‘Can we have a child exchange?’

Constructing and subverting the ‘good mother’ through play in Mumsnet Talk

## **Abstract**

This article uses a feminist poststructuralist approach to explore how contributors to a single thread from the discussion forum of a popular British parenting website, Mumsnet Talk, position themselves as ‘good mothers’. The qualitative analysis that is presented here, which draws on both the concept of indexicality, and Goffman’s (1974) ‘frame analysis’, shows that Mumsnet users are able to negotiate the discursive forces that merge to produce the good mother subject position in innovative ways. They are able to position themselves as good mothers in a way that is both normative *and* transformative; to both legitimise and subvert the discourses that work to position them in this way. This exploration leads me to suggest that the Mumsnet Talk forum can be seen as a space in which dominant discourses continue to position individuals in restricted gendered subjectivities, but also a fruitful site for the negotiation, resistance and subversion of cultural norms.

## **Keywords**

Mumsnet; motherhood; digital interaction; feminist poststructuralism; play; indexicality; framing

## **Introduction**

I can offer one (currently) sweaty and exuberant 5 year old. Reads most things.

Speaks some German. Quite helpful around the house.
Reason for sale: Excessive farting.
Any takers? 

These are the words of BertieBotts, who initiated the thread ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ on the Mumsnet Talk discussion forum in July 2014. Her post plays with the conventions of what I call classified advertisements: short written advertisements traditionally found in the ‘classified’ section of print newspapers, transposing the conventions of this genre to a new and somewhat unlikely context. Subsequent posts to this popular thread take up a similar structure and style, with participants introducing their children, describing their qualities and offering them for ‘exchange’. The result is ostensibly humorous and playful; readers and contributors share a mutual understanding that there will be no literal exchange of children.

This article aims to explore how contributors to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ negotiate their self-positioning through their digital interactions. It focuses on the question of whether dominant norms and stereotypes surrounding gender and parenthood can be seen to prevail, or whether Mumsnet contributors are able to adopt transformative subject positions and subvert dominant discourses in this context. It also considers whether Mumsnet Talk can provide resources and opportunities for its users to challenge potentially restrictive subject positions available to them as women, such as the ‘good mother’.

## **Background**

### Feminist poststructuralism and discourses of motherhood

The research presented in this article is conducted within a feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework (Baxter, 2003; Weedon, 1997), and takes the view that preferred forms of gendered subjectivity, such as the ‘good mother’, are offered through *discourses*. Discourses are conceptualised here as revolving around a central nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity, regulating our sense of, and our power to define, who we ‘are’, and what we ‘know’. Discourses thus work to constitute meanings and subject positions surrounding gender and identity in specific ways and can be difficult to escape (Foucault, 1972). However, within feminist poststructuralist theory, knowledge, power and subjectivity are conceptualised as shifting and unstable relations (Baxter, 2003; also see Foucault, 1978). A feminist poststructuralist approach is therefore able to focus on how individuals can define and redefine meanings and identities for themselves; on resistance, struggle, difference and diversity. Thus, it can support the emergence of new or transformative meanings that may to contribute to a rich diversity of ways of being(Weedon, 1997). Both Baxter (2003) and Weedon (1997) place languageat the heart of feminist poststructuralism, suggesting that language practices can both restrict what it is possible to know or who it is possible to be, but can also enable individuals to envisage new possibilities or construct discursive positions that may be transformative in nature.

There is a great deal of sociological research on the theme of both motherhood and parenthood more generally that focuses on the way cultural norms and discourses work to constitute meanings surrounding gender and parenthood specifically, and how such norms are taken up, challenged and negotiated in people’s everyday lives. One pervasive theme within this extensive body of literature is that the persistence of mother-exclusive parenting ideals continues to be very powerful in western society, where dominant discourses position women as ‘natural’ carers, and therefore the parent most needed by their children (Gillies, 2007; Wall, 2010). Such mother-exclusive parenting ideals are closely linked with the imperative for mothers to be child-centred. Both themes are bound up with entrenched notions of women’s ‘natural’ responsibility for and inclination towards caring for children. Many studies of motherhood that take a poststructuralist stance, however, acknowledge that women are not powerless to be subject positioned as carers and nurturers, but can negotiate or take up alternative subject positions (Maher and Saugeres, 2007; Miller, 2007). Such studies show that constructions of motherhood, and particularly the ‘good mother’, are dynamic, complex, and vary from one individual, situation, or context to another. For example, some authors have emphasised the restrictions dominant discourses continue to place on the lives of both male and female parents, but also show that mothers (and fathers – see Miller, 2011) can negotiate, challenge and subvert these discourses (Gillies, 2007; Lawler, 2000; Miller, 2007, 2011), even if they have to do so in ‘creative and subversive ways’ (Lawler, 2000: 167). A similar stance is taken in this article, which focuses on the ways in which Mumsnet users can both be positioned by *and* work to negotiate discourses of parenting and motherhood, and considers what resources they can draw on in order to do so.

### An indexical approach to the analysis of Mumsnet Talk

Some have argued that there is incongruity between feminist goals and postmodern standpoints such as poststructuralism. Gill (1995: 167), for example, suggests that feminist research can be paralysed by the avoidance of dichotomies and generalisations that characterise postmodern approaches, because ‘the notion that subject positions are multiple and fragmented can lead to the denial of any identity around which we can collectively mobilize’. In response, many gender and language scholars have advocated an approach that combines explorations of the complex, fluid and multiple relationships between gender and language in ‘local’ contexts with ‘global’ thinking about the way gendered structures operate in a wider social context (Baxter, 2006; Cameron, 2006). Such an approach may rely on some generalisations, or at least recognise that generalisations about gender do have an important place in everyday life, and are central to many people’s sense of self (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003; Mills and Mullany, 2011).

The concept of indexicality has been particularly useful at this local/global intersection in gender and language research. In Ochs’ (1992) theorisation of indexicality, she explains that certain linguistic or visual signs can, and do, ‘index’ particular social categories or identities. These signs can be *directly* indexical, as with the personal pronoun ‘he’ or the category ‘mother’, which point directly to the gender of the referent. They can also be *indirectly* indexical, where signs come to be associated with a particular social group through shared cultural knowledge and assumptions. Such indirect indices, Ochs (1992) suggests, are the more common of the two types, and have become metonyms for wider social constructs. Many prominent studies in the field of gender and language have applied this concept of indirect indexicality. For example, Hall (1995), in her study of telephone sex line workers, and Barrett (1998), in his study of African American Drag Queens, both suggest that their research subjects use linguistic resources that have come to be stereotypically associated with women, such as intensifiers, questions, supportive comments and precise lexical descriptions (Hall, 1995), ‘empty’ adjectives, tag questions and rising intonation in statement contexts (Barrett, 1998), to index a broadly ‘feminine’ identity (though Barrett, as I will show below, focuses on a complex of intersecting identity categories).

In recent years, sociolinguists such as Agha (2007), Bucholtz (2009) and Johnstone and Kiesling (2008) have emphasised the variable and context-dependent nature of meanings associated with indirectly indexical resources, and shown that individuals can draw on, set aside or exploit indexical associations for a range of interactional purposes. This point is supported by Barrett’s (1998) work, in which he shows how a group of African American Drag Queens draw on linguistic stereotypes relating to three social groups: African Americans, gay men and white women, not only to index these converging identities, but also to play with and undermine the audience’s perceptions of these stereotypes, and ultimately to critique ‘the social inequalities associated with white society’ (Barrett, 1998: 158). More recently, Holmes (2006) has analysed the complex ways in which individuals use resources that are indexical of gender in their everyday interactions, and the wide-ranging, sometimes counter-intuitive effects of their choices. She offers as an example the self-construction of a ‘confident woman manager’, Jill, who uses linguistic features stereotypically associated with femininity to draw on ‘the well-established stereotype of feminine incompetence around technology’ (Holmes, 2006: 3). Holmes (2006: 3) interprets Jill’s behaviour as an ‘ironic parody’ of the feminine role, which ‘implicitly ‘troubles’’ stereotypical assumptions about femininity. In addition, Kiesling (2004) and Bucholtz (2009) have shown that particular linguistic forms can come to index much more specific identities than broad, binary categories such as ‘male’ and ‘female’. Their work on the terms *dude* and *güey*, respectively, suggests that these words can index a ‘stance of cool solidarity’ that is linked with wider discourses around gender, age and ethnicity, such as ‘young masculinity’ (Kiesling, 2004: 282) and ‘hip urban Latino identity’ (Bucholtz 2009: 158). These studies show that indexical forms can vary according to context, and cannot always be straightforwardly tied to particular social functions or be seen to place individuals in a specific gendered subject position.

The analysis that follows will show how contributors to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ draw on an ‘affectively oriented’ style, which emphasises speakers’ moods, feelings and attitudes, and has been identified as a stereotypically ‘feminine’ interactional style (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). ‘Affective’ behaviour and interactional styles have also been linked to western ideals of ‘good’ motherhood, a conflation that results from the persistent positioning of women as ‘natural’ carers and nurturers (Gillies, 2007; Lawler, 2000; Wall, 2010; see above). Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 575) are quick to point out that the identification of specific gendered styles does not take account of ‘the many sources of diversity and variation… which are relevant when comparing styles of interaction’. This could include variation in terms of how individuals conceptualise ‘femininity’ and ‘good motherhood’, which will not be orientated around emotions and sensitivity for all people at all times. Holmes and Stubbe (2003) suggest that such simplistic summaries are valuable, however, because they capture common cultural assumptions that ‘men’ and ‘women’ are fundamentally different, and interact in distinctive ways. Many of these stereotypes, including the notion that women tend to adopt an ‘affectively oriented’ style, have been reiterated through several decades of early gender and language research. Individuals can therefore be seen to index a broadly ‘feminine’ and potentially ‘maternal’ identity by adopting an affectively oriented style, or elements of it. Such claims are necessarily tentative, however, and alert to the complex and nuanced ways in which individuals may negotiate with their perceptions of cultural stereotypes.

As well as pointing to indirect indices of gender (specifically femininity), the analysis that follows will also identify indirect indices of class (specifically middle class status) in the interactions of Mumsnet users. There are a number of cultural, economic and linguistic resources that have come to be stereotypically associated with a ‘middle class’ identity. For example, Bourdieu (1984) and Savage et al. (2015) have identified engagement with a wide range of ‘highbrow’ leisure and cultural activities, often connected with the arts, history and literature, as distinctive of the ‘middle’ and ‘upper’ classes. Many scholars have also identified salaried and professional occupations and wealth, particularly accumulated wealth, as distinctive of the ‘middle’ classes, as well as suggesting that ‘middle class’ individuals tend to have more qualifications and a university education (e.g. Abercrombie and Warde, 2003; Goldthorpe, 1980; Savage et al., 2015). These are widely accepted cultural assumptions, and so individuals can be seen to position themselves as broadly ‘middle class’ by drawing on these resources in their interactions with others. For example, they may mention their leisure interests, such as visiting museums. They may speak in a way that displays their communicative competence in relation to educational and professional spheres, by using formal, sophisticated vocabulary that would be highly valued in those arenas. Such stereotypically ‘middle class’ values are closely tied to western ideals of ‘good’ mothering practices (Hays, 1996; Lawler, 2000 and Wall, 2010), and so again could potentially index a maternal identity, in some contexts.

### Negotiating norms of gender and parenthood in digital contexts

A number of researchers have suggested that digital contexts are particularly fruitful sites for the negotiation of gender norms and stereotypes. Milani (2013) and Hall et al (2012), for example, highlight the ways in which users of two online forums targeted at men are able to explore multiple aspects of their gendered identities. Gong’s (2016) study of the message board of a Chinese football fan site shows that Chinese Arsenal fans are able to contest and problematise dominant discourses of Chinese masculinity in this digital space. These authors also find, however, that their research subjects are still constrained in terms of who it is possible to ‘be’ online. Hall et al. (2012), for example, suggest that hegemonic masculinities permeate interactions within a forum dedicated to the discussion of metrosexuality, continuing to influence the negotiation of supposedly ‘new’, ‘modern’ or ‘alternative’ forms of masculinity. Similarly, Milani (2013: 627) finds that users of ‘meetmarket’, an online community for men seeking men, reproduce and conform to ‘normative ideas about what defines a ‘man’’, whilst Gong (2016) finds that football fans’ language in a Chinese fan site is largely dominated by sexist discourses of football and patriarchy.

Research that specifically focuses on the interactions of mothersin digital contexts has often drawn similar conclusions. Madge and O’Connor’s (2006) study of the UK parenting website ‘babyworld’, for example, suggests that the internet can offer freedom, support and empowerment for mothers through the opening up of female-only spaces and the potential for anonymity. Lopez’ (2009) study of US ‘mommy blogs’ shows that women are able to use online spaces to challenge dominant constructions and representations of femininity and motherhood. In relation to Mumsnet Talk, Pedersen and Smithson (2013: 105) suggest that this site ‘provides a forum for shifting gender norms online’, showing, for example, that Mumsnet users frequently use language that has stereotypically been associated with masculinity, such as aggressive language and swearing. However, just as Hall et al. (2012), Milani (2013) and Gong (2016) have drawn attention to the persistence of gender norms in a number of internet discussion forums, so, too, have these studies brought the liberating capacity of online parenting sites into question. Worthington (2005: 56), for example, suggests that the commercial aims of sites such as the American ‘iVillage’ restrict the autonomy of individual users and lead to the propagation of damaging discourses that ‘support our culture’s contradictory expectations of women’. Madge and O’Connor (2006: 56), similarly, emphasise the persistence of ‘traditional stereotypes of mothering and gender roles’ in babyworld, as evidenced, for example, in participants’ persistent self-introductions as the main carer, in a two-person heterosexual relationship.

One valuable resource for the negotiation of gender norms in digital contexts is *play*, defined here as a form of interaction that is imitative, associated with ‘make-believe’ and falseness, and experimentation with multiple possibilities (Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright and Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1997; Goffman, 1974; Handelman, 1977). Many of the affordances of digital communication make online spaces particularly fruitful sites for play with self-positioning or identity. For example, the physical separation of interactants and subsequent potential for anonymity, as well as the opportunity to carefully manage interactions and sharing practices, can offer users significant control over the impression they give of themselves (Barton and Lee, 2013). Play has the potential to release individuals from gender norms and constraints, even if only temporarily. In his study of Swiss internet relay chats, for example, Rellstab (2007) analyses the practice of users who temporarily ‘switch’ their gender presentation. Rellstab’s (2007: 781) examples are brief, ‘temporary transgressions’, but in other contexts, such as the role-playing games studied by Cherny (1999), Turkle (1995) and Danet (2001), gender play and ambiguity can be more pervasive. Within the online role-playing game ‘LambdaMOO’, for example, Cherny (1999) and Turkle (1995) report that users are able to ‘become’ someone else for a sustained period. As one of Turkle’s (1995: 184) participants puts it,

You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want.

You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever.

Danet (2001) points out that LambdaMOO facilitates such flexible self-identifications by offering its users a huge range of genders from which to choose, each with their own set of pronouns, including ‘neuter’, ‘either’, ‘plural’, ‘egotistical’ and ‘royal’, amongst many others. In these contexts, play can be seen to allow individuals to move beyond gendered socio-cultural expectations and constraints in terms of what is considered to be ‘real’, ‘true’, ‘appropriate’ or ‘possible’.

## **Data and Methodology**

The Mumsnet Talk discussion forum provides relatively open access to a space in which different views and positions may be explored in everyday interactions. The popularity and influence of Mumsnet means that explorations of motherhood in this space will likely be influential in terms of wider ideas and expectations surrounding parenting and motherhood, and may even promote new and transformative conceptualisations of motherhood. To give some idea of its status and popularity, Mumsnet sees thousands of posts to the Talk forum each day and over a million visitors per month (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). There are also aspects of the Mumsnet Talk forum, however, that may limit the range of perspectives offered here. Although Mumsnet claims to be a site for ‘parents’ in general (their tagline reads ‘by parents for parents’), it targets users who identify themselves as *female* parents; as *mothers.* In addition, although Mumsnet is accessible around the world, its offices are in London, it is written exclusively in English and it deals with many topics and themes that are particular to a British context. Furthermore, demographic data (see Pedersen and Smithson, 2013) suggest that many Mumsnet users share a similar lifestyle; for example, they are likely to work for a living, to have an above-average household income, and a university degree. Any insights gained from a qualitative study of Mumsnet Talk are therefore not by any means generalisable. However, they may well have far-reaching implications for knowledge surrounding the options available to British women who are parents, and whether and how these options can be negotiated in digital contexts.

The analysis that will be presented below is part of a larger study of the discursive construction of motherhood in the Mumsnet Talk discussion forum. The first stage of this study involves the construction of a small corpus of fifty threads (just under 220,000 words), which were posted to Mumsnet Talk over a five-month period in 2014. The second stage involves detailed analyses of two threads taken from this larger data set, one of which is ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ Analysis of this thread begins with coding and categorisation, guided by the principles of grounded theory (see Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and supplemented by close scrutiny of language, especially recurring linguistic features. Coding the thread is the first step in a cumulative analytical process that leads to the identification and analysis of potential discourses at work in Mumsnet users’ interactions. As the coding process develops, I begin to conceptualise some nodes as ‘theoretical nodes’, which are ‘integrative’ and begin to tell an ‘analytic story’ (Charmaz, 2014: 150). Identifying these nodes is an important part of the process of identifying and theorising about larger structures at work in these digital interactions, which later leads to the identification of potential discourses. The theoretical nodes identified from the coding of ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ are as follows:

* child centricity;
* indexing class;
* indexing gender, and
* the classified advertisement frame.

These nodes capture my perception that contributors to this thread draw on distinctive sets of resources that bring to mind, in the first instance, the genre of classified advertisements, and in the second instance, cultural stereotypes surrounding gender and class. In order to make sense of these patterns in relation to Mumsnet users’ discursive positioning in this thread, I turn to the concept of indexicality (see above), and also Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis. Subsequently, I conceptualise the linguistic features I associate with class and gender as indirect indices – resources that have come, through shared cultural knowledge, to be stereotypically associated with a particular gender or classed group. Taking an indexical approach to the linguistic analysis of interactions from ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ leads me to theorise about the ways in which contributors position themselves in relation to broader structures; about the discourses that are at play in this thread. Where participants draw on resources that relate not to a cultural stereotype, but to the classified advertisement genre, I conceptualise their linguistic behaviour as ‘keying’, whereby the conventions of a ‘frame’, an activity governed by specific ‘principles of organization’ (Goffman, 1974: 10), are transposed to a new context, without any expectation that the usual outcomes of the original activity will occur.

In the sections that follow, I draw on samples from my analysis of ‘Can we have a child exchange?’, showing how I identified four discourses at play in this thread and how Mumsnet users are positioned by and position themselves in relation to these discourses, often in innovative ways. The nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity remains central throughout this analytical process, so that I consider whether and how particular forms of knowledge are constituted, whether and how Mumsnet users are positioned (or position themselves) in particular subject positions and whether and how power relations are inscribed. I do so through a focus on the key linguistic, digital and interactional resources through which these discursive positions are realised. In particular, I consider how contributors draw on *play* and *humour* to position themselves through their digital interactions.

## **Data Analysis**

### Identifying and analysing four discourses: commercialisation, gendered parenthood, classed parenthood and child-centric motherhood

*Commercialisation.*The extent to which contributors to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ key the classified advertisement frame varies from one post to the next, but the majority of posts display enough of the conventions of this genre to make the frame identifiable. One post, written by ‘Clobbered’ (see extract 1), is an apt example.

Extract 1: post 52.

**Clobbered** Wed 16-Jul-14 20:49:07

1. Model 1: Twenty-one, driver, non-smoker, recent graduate. Self-caring but tendency to wake

2. early and pace the floor.

3. Model 2: Twenty, excellent cook and percussionist. Extreme clothing abuse (floordrobe

4. currently occupying 2 rooms of the house).

5. Model 3: Screen-bound thirteen year old. Obsessed with Lego and Geomag. Likes cats but

6. couldn't eat a whole one.

7. Free to good home.

In this post, Clobbered employs the linguistic conventions of classified advertisements such as the impersonal label and numbers ‘Model 1, 2 and 3’, which would usually name inanimate objects such as cars or computers. She also describes her children through lists of descriptive categories, such as ‘twenty-one’ (line 1), ‘excellent cook’ (line 3) and ‘screen-bound thirteen year old’ (line 5). These descriptions and categorisations foreground her children’s ‘qualities’ or ‘assets’, but background their personal relationship. They work not only to key the classified advertisement frame, but to position her children as objects for sale; as commodities, who are being promoted in a busy marketplace. In turn, Clobbered herself is positioned as the ‘producer’ of her children as commodities.

Contributors’ keying of the classified advertisement frame superimposes a commercial perspective on motherhood, women and their relation to children. Thus, I would argue that both Mumsnet users and their children are positioned as subjects of a discourse of *commercialisation* here. At the same time, however, the operation of this discourse through the playful keying of the classified advertisement frame means that these values are also subverted from the outset. When contributors key the classified advertisement frame, which is very much out of place in this thread, they suggest that their implied indifference to their children is laughable; inconceivable, even; that what they say is not what is meant. Similarly, the pervasive irony of the thread suggests that the demands placed upon participants, to be entirely responsible and accountable for their children, are also laughable. Thus, Mumsnet users achieve a complex and nuanced self-positioning whereby they simultaneously position themselves as subjects of a discourse of commercialisation, as mothers who are entirely responsible for their children as ‘products’, yet also resist being positioned in this way.

*Gendered parenthood.*It is not only the linguistic conventions of classified advertisements that recur in the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread. Contributors also tend to use a proliferation of linguistic and digital resources that serve to emphasise their personal, emotive responses: to add what I call *affective emphasis* to the descriptions of their children. Some excerpts that exemplify this pattern are offered in extract 2.

Extract 2: excerpts from posts 4, 11, 44 and 58.

I've got am extremely useful 11yo DD [darling daughter]. Reason for swap? 3 gazillion wayward loom bands that she **needs** inhher possession at all times (post 4)

he's lovely to snuggle and smells nice  (post 11)

**PLEASE SOMEBODY TAKE MY 5 YR OLD DS BEFORE MY HEAD EXPLODES WITH HIS CONSTANT CHATTERING!!!!** (post 44)

She is VERY cute though  (post 58)

In these examples, contributors use intensive adjectives such as ‘lovely’ (post 11) and ‘cute’ (post 58), and intensifying adverbs such as ‘very’ (post 58) and ‘extremely’ (post 4) to describe their children in positive, emotive terms. They also use various digital resources to emphasise their affective responses, including bold (posts 4 and 44), capitals (posts 44 and 58), punctuation (post 44) and smileys (posts 11 and 58). Contributors’ use of these intensifying resources builds colourful portraits that are focused on their own affective responses to their children. At the same time, these participants can be seen to draw on stereotypes around femininity (which are linked to western ideals of ‘good’ motherhood); namely, the cultural expectation that women orient towards an affective interactional style. In this way, these Mumsnet users can be said to position themselves within a discourse of *gendered parenthood*, which constitutes distinct and binary parental subject positions along gendered lines, producing feminine mothers and, by extension, masculine fathers. It is not clear, however, whether contributors frequently use affective emphasis in descriptions of their children primarily to emphasise their connections with and personal responses to their children, to position themselves, and embrace their position, as ‘feminine’ mothers, or to play with and subvert stereotypes around femininity and ‘good motherhood’. In the context of this playful, humorous thread, contributors’ posts can certainly be read as playful parody, whether this is consciously intended or not. Contributors’ use of an affectively oriented style in ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ can therefore be seen to have multiple effects. The pervasive tone of irony and humour further obscures their discursive positioning, making it both negotiable and deniable.

*Classed parenthood.*Contributors to the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread often emphasise their children’s qualities, abilities and achievements, as well as emphasising their own access to the cultural and economic resources that support these achievements. Some excerpts that exemplify this pattern are offered in extract 3.

Extract 3: excerpts from posts 52, 55 and 87.

Model 1: Twenty-one, driver, non-smoker, recent graduate. Self-caring but tendency to wake early and pace the floor (post 52)

At most other times she is to be found sitting with pen in hand, or typing away on her novel (post 55)

Their days are spent accidentally breaking apart fiendishly complex Lego constructions and wailing for help in reconstruction, as their ability to see what to do and understand lego instructions is greater than their ability to accomplish it, due to lack of coordination (post 66)

She's lovely, she's bright, chatty and well-behaved. She's also training her voice in classical soprano singing. All day. Every day. Non-stop (post 87)

In these examples, there are many references to wealth, educational opportunity and ‘highbrow’ cultural activities, all of which have come to be associated with a western ‘middle class’ identity. For example, by drawing attention to their children’s intelligence and ambition in examples such as ‘recent graduate’ (post 52), ‘typing away on her novel’ (post 55), and ‘training her voice in classical soprano singing’ (post 87), these contributors position themselves as parents who are able to provide their children with opportunities to succeed in academic and workplace arenas. The author of post 66 also makes formal, complex and sophisticated linguistic choices that point to her communicative competence in spheres associated with being ‘middle class’, such as higher education and professional occupations. This complex construction can be divided into multiple clauses, several of which also have very complex internal structures, such as ‘accidentally breaking apart fiendishly complex Lego constructions’, which includes extensive modification through a range of adjectives, adverbs and adjectival or noun phrases. Post 66 also includes formal and sophisticated lexical items and syntactical structures, such as ‘fiendishly’, ‘reconstruction’, ‘copious’ and ‘riotous’. Similar lexical items can be found across the thread.

This analysis leads me to suggest that a discourse of *classed parenthood* is also at play in this thread. This discourse positions parents in classed subject positions; in this case, as ‘middle class’ parents. As before, however, contributors to this thread do not take up this subject position (which is associated with western ideals of ‘good’ motherhood) in any straightforward way. In this playful and humorous context, they can be said to both take up, but also resist and subvert a ‘middle class’ subject position. They embrace their children’s achievements, and implicitly, their own contribution to these achievements, but also mock the apparent need to emphasise their children’s expensive, time-consuming and intellectual pursuits in order to position their children as ‘valuable’ and themselves as ‘good mothers’.

*Child-centric motherhood.*The opening post to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’, cited at the start of this paper and reproduced in extract 4, below, invites contributors to paint a vivid picture of their child(ren) through detailed descriptions, in keeping with the conventions of the classified advertisement frame. Through these detailed descriptions, participants position themselves exclusively in relation to their children: our sense of the author’s identity is gained through descriptions of their children.

Extract 4: opening post to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’

**BertieBotts** Wed 16-Jul-14 13:23:30

1. I can offer one (currently) sweaty and exuberant 5 year old. Reads most things. Speaks some 2. German. Quite helpful around the house.

3. Reason for sale: Excessive farting.

4. Any takers? 

One thing that becomes clear through BertieBotts’ descriptions is that certain traits and behaviours in children are valued in this thread and others are not. For example, BertieBotts’ opening post implies that she values intelligence (‘reads most things’ – line 1), special skills (‘speaks some German’ – lines 1-2) and helpfulness (‘quite helpful around the house’ – line 2). She does not value bad habits (‘excessive farting’ – line 3). Subsequent posts tend to reproduce these preferred and dispreferred traits and behaviours, with some variants, additions and exclusions. These evaluations (though they are not exclusively positive) generally work to position contributors within a discourse of *child-centric motherhood*, as proud, loving mothers who celebrate their children’s qualities and achievements; who place their children at the centre of their lives and are positioned and evaluated in relation to their children. This is in keeping with western cultural assumptions that mothers’ lives are centred around their children. It is also consistent with the analysis detailed above, which shows that contributors work to emphasise their children’s qualities, achievements and abilities, often using affective emphasis in order to do so.

### Merging discourses: Constructing and subverting the ‘good mother’ through play

The four discourses identified above can be seen to merge across the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread. The interplay between these discourses is exemplified in post 51 (see extract 5).

Extract 5: excerpt from post 51.

**MicrobatSister** Wed 16-Jul-14 20:34:37

1. I have on offer an 8.5 yr old DS [darling son], who is lovely and kindhearted, but can talk

2. about Minecraft for at least an hour before pausing for breath. He also wishes to become a

3. virologist when he grows up, and has (in his mind, anyway) recently invented a cure for the 4. common cold, which he also natters endlessly on and on and on about. He is trying to rope

5. me in to getting him a market stall (a precursor to him having a chain of stores - or is it

6. better to just sell the recipe for millions instead, Mummy?) and helping him sell it! Has a

7. voice like a FOGHORN, even his 'whispering' can be heard in the street outside. Does sleep

8. very well though.

9. Alternatively, I have DS2 - who is 2 next week. Looks utterly angelic - blonde, big

10. blue eyes, very cuddly. But again, voice like a FOGHORN, like a duracell bunny, just starting 11. the whole tantrums phase, and STILL wakes 4-5 times a night!

In this post, MicrobatSister can be seen to take up the full range of discourses identified above. For example, she arguably positions herself within a discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’, as a *female* parent, by drawing on resources that are indexical of femininity and motherhood in the descriptions of her children. These include the intensive adverbs ‘utterly’ (line 9) and ‘very’ (lines 8 and 10) and the intensive adjectives ‘lovely’ (line 1), ‘angelic’ (line 9) and ‘cuddly’ (line 10). MicrobatSister also uses capital letters for affective emphasis, drawing attention to her negative personal reaction to her son’s behaviour with her capitalisation of ‘FOGHORN’ (lines 7 and 10) and ‘STILL’ (line 11). Other descriptions potentially position her within a discourse of ‘classed parenthood’. Her formal lexical choices such as ‘virologist’ (line 3) and ‘wishes to become…’ (line 2), for example, display a communicative competence that would be highly valued in educational and professional spheres. She also emphasises her family’s access to economic resources in the statement ‘He also wishes to become a virologist when he grows up, and has… recently invented a cure for the common cold’ (lines 2-4). Here, she implicitly suggests that her child has access to a good education and is likely to enter a very well-paid profession that will entail years of university education. By emphasising her son’s educational and professional potential, MicrobatSister can also be said to position herself as a ‘middle-class’ parent, who has access to a range of cultural and economic resources to support this path for her child. At the same time, her lengthy descriptions serve to commodify her children, labelling them in terms of their desirable qualities, skills and virtues and thus positioning them within a discourse of ‘commercialisation’, as objects of scrutiny. At the same time, she also emphasises her own commitment to her children, thus also drawing on the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse.

These features of MicrobatSister’s post also combine to produce an expressive description of her children that is complex and nuanced. This description works to both praise and criticise, to emphasise both her love for, but also her exasperation with, her children. The humorous, ironic and playful premise of the thread adds another layer of complexity to her self-positioning, so that she can be seen at once to both embrace the expressive possibilities of this communicative style, but at the same time to subvert and critique the discourses at play here. I suggest at this point that these discourses merge to position MicrobatSister, and other contributors, as ‘good mothers’, who embody cultural stereotypes and assumptions around ‘affective’ femininity and ‘sensitive’ motherhood, middle-class status and child-centric parenting. It can be argued that MicrobatSister both takes up the ‘good mother’ subject position, but also resists and subverts aspects of this subject position that restrict the ways of being that are available to her.

Some of the linguistic resources participants deploy in ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ underline the complex nature of their positioning in more explicit ways. For example, post 58 (see extract 6) marks out ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ forms of expression for a ‘good mother’.

Extract 6: excerpt from post 58.

**WhispersOfWickedness** Wed 16-Jul-14 21:28:59

1. I have a ~~PITA~~ [pain in the arse] cheeky 4 yo [year old] who NEEDS to go to school now, I'll

2. have him back at the beginning of September  He likes crafts (covering every surface in 3. glitter and using copious amounts of prittstick and PVA glue), the park and Frozen.

WhispersofWickedness’ use of strikethrough text and brackets marks the negative evaluations ‘PITA’ (pain in the arse – line 1) and ‘covering every surface in glitter…’ (lines 2-3) as unacceptable forms of expression for the ‘good mother’ subject, whilst their uncensored counterparts, ‘cheeky’ (line 1) and ‘likes crafts’ (line 2), are acceptable. These examples of ‘double-speak’ point to an underlying power struggle within the playful contributions of this thread. By drawing attention to ‘accepted’ forms of expression, contributors such as WhispersofWickedness highlight the difficulty for women, as parents, to escape discourses that work to position them as ‘good mothers’. The implication is that, as subjects positioned by these discourses, women are expected to describe their children in particular ways, for example to evaluate them in positive terms even where their behaviour can be interpreted as negative or destructive. Through these playful exchanges, contributors such as MicrobatSister and WhispersOfWickedness work to shift and destabilise the intersecting discourses that merge to produce the ‘good mother’ subject; to destabilise, rework and rewrite discourses of parenting and motherhood.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis presented in this article leads me to suggest that humour and play are important resources for Mumsnet users as they work to negotiate discursive forces in innovative ways, both as individuals and as part of a wider community of Mumsnet users. Through play and humour, contributors to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ are able to adopt the ‘good mother’ subject position in a way that is at once both normative *and* transformative. In other words, they can be seen to position themselves as ‘good mothers’, and thus to embrace and legitimise the dominant discourses that merge to produce this subject position, but at the same time to resist and subvert aspects of this subject position that constrain the ways of being that are available to them.

The playful keying of the classified advertisement frame in this thread is instrumental in Mumsnet users’ complex self-positioning because it marks their talk as *play,* and thus creates a sense that what is saidis not necessarily what is meant*,* obscuring the nature of their discursive positioning. This form of play is likely to be facilitated, at least in part, by the potential for anonymity in this digital context, which can be said to allow individuals to move beyond socio-cultural expectations and constraints. It may also be facilitated by Mumsnet users’ shared sense of belonging, history and mutual understanding, which may allow them to engage in spontaneous, subversive humour and play without fear that it will be misconstrued, or taken too seriously. The findings presented in this article are therefore able to support claims by scholars such as Lopez (2009) and Pedersen and Smithson (2013: 105) that online spaces can be fruitful sites for the resistance and subversion of dominant cultural norms, especially surrounding gender and motherhood.

These findings offer an important contribution of knowledge at the intersection of discourse studies and the sociolinguistic fields of gender and language, and language and digital communication. They point to the relevance of studies that cross-cut these fields at a time when interactions and exchanges of information often take place through the internet and digital media, and which play an important role in people’s understanding of the social world and their place within it. Of particular importance is my finding that the Mumsnet Talk forum can be a fruitful site for challenging dominant discourses and negotiating transformative subject positions, providing ground that is ripe for play, humour and ambiguity. However, I do not suggest that digital contexts in general, or the specific affordance of play, can facilitate complete escape from the discourses that can both empower individuals, but also restrict the ways in which they can position themselves in the world.

## **Author Biography**

Jai Mackenzie is a Teaching Fellow in English Language and Applied Linguistics at The University of Birmingham. Her primary research interests lie in explorations of language, gender, sexuality and parenthood, especially in new media contexts. She is also interested in the construction of privacy through digital interaction. She is currently using qualitative methods to explore the discursive construction of motherhood within the Mumsnet Talk discussion forum.

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