Digital Interaction

To appear in the Routledge Handbook of English Language and Digital Humanities, ed. S. Adolphs and D. Knight

INTRODUCTION

The question of how digital technologies can both shed light on, and affect, the human experience (and indeed, how the human experience affects digital technologies) is an abiding concern for research in the Digital Humanities (Burdick et al. 2012; Evans & Rees 2012). Research at the intersection of English Language and the Digital Humanities is particularly well situated to answer this question, and has revealed much about the ways in which people use digital technologies to communicate about, and situate themselves in relation to, aspects of human and social experience such as gender and sexuality (Elm 2007; Halonen & Leppänen 2017; Milani 2013), political discourse (Chiluwa 2012; Mayo & Taboada 2017; Ross & Rivers 2017) and health communication (Brookes & Baker 2017; Harvey, Locher & Mullany 2013; Mullany et al. 2015).

This chapter will consider what English Language studies can reveal about the human (and especially the social) world through a focus on digital interactions, defined here as multi-participant conversations and exchanges that make use of a computer, mobile phone or other electronic device. It will show that digital spaces in which individuals come together to interact, share information and form social bonds, such as social media platforms, discussion forums and blogging sites, can offer unprecedented access to multiple voices and competing perspectives in relation to a range of human and social concerns. As a result, they can provide fruitful ground for researchers to develop a deeper understanding of current social norms and trends, new and emerging communicative practices and the development and behaviour of social groups.

The chapter begins with a brief summary of recent English Language research that has critically examined social issues such as discrimination and conflict as they are played out and negotiated in and through digital interactions. It will then introduce a theme that has been relatively
little explored at the meeting point of English Language and the Digital Humanities: *parenthood*. My own study of Mumsnet Talk ([https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk](https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk)), the discussion forum of a popular UK parenting website, will shed light on this area, contributing to knowledge in the Digital Humanities about what it means to be a parent and a mother in a digital age. My exploration of this study begins with a discussion of the ethical issues involved in researching a digital site, which is a key area of debate in the Digital Humanities (Burdick et al. 2012). The chapter will also briefly outline the qualitative methods that are used to explore Mumsnet Talk interactions, highlighting the relevance of qualitative research in the Digital Humanities. It will show how digital technologies have not only facilitated the interactions that form the basis of the Mumsnet study, but have also supported the qualitative research process, through the use of specialised software for qualitative data analysis. Finally, some of the findings from the study will be illustrated through an exploration of the linguistic resources Mumsnet Talk contributors use to position themselves and others as individuals and as parents, and a consideration of how their involvement in the forum affects their access to these resources.

**CURRENT CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESEARCH**

Research exploring the language of digital interactions in a range of contexts has revealed a great deal about the forms such communication can take, in terms of specific linguistic devices, structures and styles. Lee (2007) and Nishimura (2007) have documented some of the linguistic and stylistic features of email and instant messages in Hong Kong and Japanese bulletin board messages respectively, showing how writers use a range of creative strategies to communicate effectively in a digital medium. For example, Lee (2007: 191) has shown that, in emails and instant messages, Hong Kong users have represented Cantonese through innovative devices such as literal translations and romanised Cantonese, as well as traditional Cantonese and Chinese characters. Danet et al. (1997), Deumert (2014) and Katsuno and Yano (2007) have explored the potential for creativity, playfulness and expressivity in a range of social networking sites and discussion forums based in the U.S., South...
Africa and Japan. For example, Danet et al. (1997: np) explore a sequence of early internet relay chat in which playful effects are created through the use of basic keyboard functions, such as the repetition of the letter s in ‘ssssssssssss’ and the use of asterisks, as in ‘*puff* *hold*’, to simulate the sounds and gestures involved in smoking marijuana. Katsuno and Yano (2007: 284) have pointed to the diversity of meanings that can be generated with kaomoji, the Japanese equivalent of emoticons, which express complex expressions, gestures and emotions by creating pictures using basic keyboard functions, such as \(@o@\)/ to represent an expression of ‘sheer fright, eyes wide in astonishment, hands raised’.

In recent years, linguists have tended to be concerned not only with the micro-linguistic features and styles of digital interactions, but also with the macro-social and political issues, group practices, communities and identities that are explored and created through digital interactions. This kind of user-focused sociocultural approach is perhaps demonstrated most clearly through research that explores both the creation and resistance of discriminatory practices in interactive digital contexts. For example, Chiluwa (2012), Fozdar and Pedersen (2013) and Törnberg and Törnberg (2016) have examined discussions in customised websites, interactive blogs and forums to show how different individuals and groups have taken up both discriminatory and anti-discriminatory discourses online. Fozdar and Pedersen’s (2013) analysis of an Australian interactive blog about asylum seekers, for instance, suggests that online spaces where people can engage in public debate may be productive sites for the resistance of dominant norms and the negotiation of marginalised, emergent or counter-hegemonic discourses such as ‘bystander anti-racism’. Exploring the ways in which people negotiate competing norms and perspectives online is a recurring theme in studies of language and digital interaction. For example, Gong (2016), Hall et al. (2012) and Lehtonen (2017) have examined the ways in which contributors to message boards and discussion forums have worked to negotiate and potentially transgress restrictive gender norms and expectations in their everyday digital interactions. However, many of these researchers are cautious about such findings, with Hall et al. (2012) and Gong (2016), for instance, suggesting that discourses of hegemonic
masculinity and sexism continue to influence the negotiation of supposedly ‘new’, ‘alternative’ or ‘queer’ forms of masculinity in the online interactions they analyse.

Online communities and networks for parents, especially mothers, have been a source of particular interest for researchers in the Social Sciences and Digital Humanities who are concerned with group practices, communities and wider social issues around gender and parenthood. Much of this research has suggested that parenting forums around the world, such as Familjeliv in Sweden (Hanell & Salö 2017), Momstown in Canada (Mulcahy, Parry & Glover 2015) and Happy Land in Hong Kong (Chan 2008) can offer safe spaces in which women can explore motherhood on their own terms, express their personal perspectives, negotiate shared experiences with other mothers, and even challenge dominant forms of knowledge around femininity, pregnancy and motherhood. However, a number of scholars have also pointed to the persistence of traditional and dominant norms and expectations within such digital contexts, suggesting that they do not facilitate such egalitarian and transgressive interactions as it may first appear. Madge and O’Connor (2006), for example, have pointed to the normative demographics of sites such as babyworld, the UK’s first parenting website (no longer in operation), where participants persistently introduce themselves as the main carer, in a two-person heterosexual relationship. Boon and Pentney (2015) have shown that contributors to the U.S. site BabyCenter (https://www.babycenter.com) present themselves in similar ways, pointing to the exclusive portrayal of white, cisgender, heteronormative families in users’ breastfeeding selfies. Such hegemonic norms of gender, sexuality and race, they suggest, are propagated by the architecture of the site itself, which portrays the same groups in its fixed, edited and advertising images.

Mumsnet Talk, the discussion forum of the popular British parenting website Mumsnet, has been identified as a particularly relevant site for the study of contemporary motherhood in a British context. Pedersen and Smithson (2013) and Pedersen (2016) have suggested that this forum, like many others around the world, provides a space in which women can shape their identities as mothers and resist dominant ideals and expectations of femininity and motherhood. Pedersen’s
(2016) analysis of 50 Mumsnet Talk threads that use the term ‘good mother’ in the thread title, for example, shows that contributors construct a complex picture of ‘good motherhood’, including decisions that might not otherwise be considered in the best interests of the child, such as returning to work or giving up breastfeeding. Similarly, in her analysis of Mumsnet Talk threads about postnatal depression, Jaworksa (2018) shows that members use a range of communicative resources, such as confessions and exemplums, to challenge and rework ideals of ‘good motherhood’. My own study of Mumsnet Talk (Mackenzie 2017a, 2018a, 2018b) can support the view that this site provides a forum for challenging and shifting norms of gender and parenthood, but with some important caveats, as I will show below.

In the following section, as part of a discussion of the ethics of internet research in the Digital Humanities, I explore some of the practical, legal and ethical issues around using data from the Mumsnet Talk forum, before presenting the overall approach taken in this study, and some of its key findings.

CRITICAL ISSUES: CONDUCTING ETHICAL RESEARCH IN THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES

Critical issues around the use of online data for research purposes have been the subject of much discussion by English Language and Digital Humanities researchers, with particular attention being paid to the legality of using digital data and copyright rules (Pihlaja 2017), the public/private dichotomy and its implications (Giaxoglou 2017), issues of consent, including whether and how to ask for it (Rüdiger & Dayter 2017), and the use of data from specific sites such as Twitter (Ahmed, Bath & Demartini 2017), Tinder (Condie, Lean & Wilcockson 2017) and Mumsnet (Mackenzie 2017b). These reflections and discussions of the ethics of online research methods have in common a case-based, context-sensitive approach that takes into account the norms and regulations of the research site, the nature of its users and their interactions, and the ways in which data is both collected and analysed, as well as practical considerations including whether it is feasible to contact research subjects.
The ethical decision-making process for the Mumsnet study, which will be briefly explored below with a focus on the issue of consent, is based on such a context-sensitive approach. My self-reflexive observations of this forum, conducted as part of a qualitative, semi-ethnographic approach, led me to recognise certain norms of interaction and sharing within this context that subsequently affected my decisions about data sampling, informed consent and anonymity. For example, I realised that, although this was a publicly accessible forum, contributors tended to address quite a specific audience that I felt did not include me (as a researcher), and that most Mumsnet users would not expect a researcher to take an interest in their contributions. In addition, it became clear to me during the course of my observations that Mumsnet users often valued their sense of privacy and anonymity very highly, with many exercising their autonomy and agency in imaginative ways to control and shape the accessibility of their posts and the degree to which they were identifiable as single users. One of the most important decisions I made as a result of these considerations was to contact all of the Mumsnet users whose words I wished to quote and/or analyse in detail, and ask for their informed consent.

The process of seeking consent from participants in the Mumsnet study involved careful planning. I initially contacted Mumsnet users via the site’s private messaging system, a method chosen in collaboration with Mumsnet staff. I sent request messages to potential participants in batches of 10, spaced at 24-hour intervals, so that I could gauge participants’ reactions before contacting the next group. Choosing the right words for this message involved several adjustments in response to opinions and concerns that participants raised as they responded. In addition, I made it very clear in this message that silence would not be interpreted as consent; in other words, contributors who did not respond were not included in the study. My message also gave contributors the option to have their usernames anonymised. Several participants chose to do so and were subsequently given pseudonyms that retained the spirit of their original username. Further explanation of this process, and detailed insights about how I negotiated issues of privacy and anonymity, are offered in Mackenzie (2017b) and Mackenzie (2018a).
Communicating via private message was ultimately a very effective way of reaching out to Mumsnet users, who were usually quick to respond. There were also other, unanticipated benefits of contacting participants in this way. For example, some were keen to engage in conversation about my research. These informal discussions provided invaluable insights into my participants’ opinions and feelings about Mumsnet Talk, and about their interactions being used in academic research. These insights further informed my developing understanding of the interactional norms within this forum. They also gave participants an opportunity to voice any concerns and ask questions; to have some sense that they were involved in the research process as participants rather than passive research subjects.

The following section offers further details about the Mumsnet study itself, including the nature of the research site and the research design, before presenting a sample analysis of one thread posted to Mumsnet Talk in June 2014.

THE MUMSNET STUDY

The parenting website Mumsnet was founded in the year 2000 by the British entrepreneur Justine Roberts, with the aim of ‘mak[ing] parents’ lives easier by pooling knowledge, advice and support’ (Mumsnet Limited 2019) and has since been steadily growing in popularity and status. The site hosts over 6 million visitors each month (Pedersen 2016) and its endorsement is highly sought after in commercial and political arenas. Mumsnet’s ‘family friendly’ awards for companies ‘making life easier for parents’ in the UK and ‘Mumsnet best’ awards for products with high ranking reviews (Mumsnet Limited 2019) are a testament to the site’s authoritative position on who, and what, can best meet the needs of UK families. The site has hosted a number of online discussions with politicians and The Times even described the 2010 election as the ‘Mumsnet election’, due to its perceived influence amongst mothers as a key voting group (Pedersen & Smithson 2013). The Mumsnet website is divided into a number of different sections, but it is arguably best known for its
discussion forum, Talk, an interactive space in which users can share details of their daily lives, make pleas and offers of support and exchange ideas or information.

Although the Mumsnet Talk forum has a relatively large number of users, the range of perspectives that are offered in this space is somewhat limited. Mumsnet claims to be a site for ‘parents’ in general (their tagline reads ‘by parents for parents’), but it targets users who identify themselves as female parents; as mothers. The name of the site, for example, employs the gendered category ‘mum’, and its logo seems to depict three women in ‘battle’ poses, armed with children or feeding equipment (see figure 1.1). In addition, although Mumsnet is accessible around the world, it is very much a British site; its headquarters are in London, it is written exclusively in English and, in terms of topical discussion, it deals with many themes that are particular to a British context. Furthermore, demographic data collected by both Pedersen and Smithson (2013) and the 2009 Mumsnet census (see Pedersen & Smithson, 2013) suggest that many Mumsnet users are working mothers with an above-average household income and a university degree. Any insights gained from the study of Mumsnet Talk are therefore not by any means generalisable to all mothers. However, the accessibility, popularity and influence of Mumsnet Talk means that discussions in this space are likely to influence wider norms and expectations around gender and parenting, and may even lead the way in terms of new concepts of ‘motherhood’. This makes it a particularly relevant context for examining the options available to women who are parents in contemporary British society.

Figure 1. Mumsnet logo (reproduced with the permission of Mumsnet Limited)

<insert figure 1 here>

The theoretical approach taken in the study of Mumsnet Talk that will be presented here is influenced by the work of Foucault (especially 1972 and 1978), who emphasises the way powerful forces, often conceptualised as discourses, work to constitute the social world and the power relations, forms of knowledge and subject positions that come with it. My focus on language and
poststructuralist theory distinguishes the Mumsnet study from other studies on parenting and motherhood online, such as those that have been introduced above. In short, this study aims to explore how Mumsnet users take up, negotiate and challenge discourses of gender, parenting and motherhood in their digital interactions. It focuses on the complex interplay between multiple and competing forms of knowledge about gender and parenthood, and the subject positions (or ‘ways of being an individual’, as Weedon (1997: 3) puts it) that are inscribed by these forms of knowledge. This focus is captured in the central research question ‘how do Mumsnet users position themselves, and how are they positioned, in relation to discourses of gender and parenthood in Mumsnet Talk interactions?’.

The aims of the Mumsnet study are well served by qualitative methods. Until recently, research in the Digital Humanities has been dominated by ‘big data’ and quantitative research, but the value of ‘small data’ and qualitative methods is increasingly being recognised (boyd 2011; Evans & Rees 2012; Gelfgren 2016; Kitchin 2013). This chapter advocates for the development of qualitative methods in the Digital Humanities, showing that they are able to support rich, in-depth explorations of how social roles, norms and situations are constructed and negotiated in a digital age. In the case of the Mumsnet study, it is the norms and expectations around gender, parenting and motherhood, and the ways in which Mumsnet Talk users negotiate these norms through their digital interactions, that are under investigation. A qualitative approach is also aligned with the poststructuralist standpoint that is taken in this study, because it encourages and facilitates the researcher’s openness and flexibility, and is able to both acknowledge multiple voices in the data and embrace multiple interpretive possibilities.

There are a number of software packages that can support qualitative data analysis (QDA) in English Language and the Digital Humanities, such as ATLAS.ti, MAXQDA and NVivo. All of these tools can support the management and qualitative analysis of the multiple data types that are frequently found in digital contexts, including a range of text, visual and audio files. Within these programmes, the researcher creates a project space, into which external data can be uploaded, coded, annotated,
organised and searched. They all include visualisation tools and some, such as MAXQDA, also offer a good range of functions for statistical analysis, making them particularly well suited to mixed methods research. QSR International’s NVivo 10 (2012) was identified as the software best equipped to serve the needs and exclusively qualitative research design of the Mumsnet study. Its NCapture function, which captures and preserves web pages in full, facilitated the collection of Mumsnet Talk discussion pages in a single file and in their original format, with text and images appearing exactly as they would to users of the forum. The key functionality of NVivo is coding, whereby passages of data can be stored and organised in ‘nodes’, which function as digital holding points for coded passages of text. Nodes can either be free, operating as separate entities, or organised in hierarchical relationships, so that related nodes can be grouped together within larger categories.

The qualitative methods that are employed in the Mumsnet Talk study are briefly outlined below, including details of how coding within NVivo supported the research process.

The Mumsnet study can be divided into two stages: 'data construction' and 'identifying and analysing discourses', which are summarised in visual form in figure 2, below (see Mackenzie 2018a for a detailed overview of the research process in full, including theory, methods and data). In keeping with the qualitative paradigm, these processes advanced semi-iteratively, rather than being employed in a pre-determined, linear fashion.

Figure 2. Research Design for the Mumsnet Study

<insert figure 2 here>

The first stage of the Mumsnet study, 'data construction', took influence from the qualitative traditions of both ethnography and grounded theory, and served to enrich my understanding of both the Mumsnet Talk discussion forum and the research process itself. The naming of this stage is drawn from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014), which acknowledges that both research, and the ‘data’ on which it is based, are not fixed or stable concepts or entities, but are
constructed by the researcher (also see Mason 2002). The methods utilised during the process of data construction include ‘systematic observation’ (Androutsopoulos 2008) of the forum over a period of five months, which facilitated emerging insights about the benefits Mumsnet users gain from being members of the site, as well as the nature of Mumsnet Talk discussions themselves. During the observation period, threads were collected through purposive sampling (Oliver 2006; Robson 2011), where the aims of the study guided the selection of threads for further analysis. This process led to the creation of a corpus of 50 threads totalling just under 220,000 words. These threads were stored, coded and categorised in digital form within NVivo. Memos were also written and stored in digital form throughout this stage, providing opportunities to examine my role as a ‘constructor’ of data and serving as a record of my thoughts, reflections and developing interpretations.

The process of data construction was a springboard for the second stage of the Mumsnet study: ‘identifying and analysing discourses’. At the mid-point between these stages, I selected two threads for further detailed, qualitative analysis - ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ and ‘Your identity as a mother’. These threads included several points of convergence between nodes relating to gender and parenthood, providing opportunities for the exploration of multiple and competing perspectives on these themes. The process of identifying and analysing discourses in these threads began with what Charmaz (2014) calls ‘focused coding’. This form of coding involved theorising about larger structures at work in the threads by identifying ‘theoretical codes’ that were indicative of discursive formations because they captured particular forms of knowledge, power and subjectivity. Some of the theoretical codes I identified from my analysis of ‘Your identity as a mother’ at this point, such as ‘total motherhood’ (which contains 118 references), were deemed important because of their prevalence in the thread, whilst others were considered analytically significant for other reasons. For example, the ‘equality between parents’ node is of particular interest because it contrasts so sharply with ‘total motherhood’. The ‘references to men’ node (which contains 21 references) is notable for its infrequency, and points to a conspicuous absence of
men across the thread. Such absences or marginalised themes were considered significant because it is not just what is central or dominant, but what is peripheral or marginalised, that can point to the presence of discourses (Sunderland 2000).

Focused coding provided the skeleton for my subsequent linguistic analysis of Mumsnet Talk threads: a point from which I moved forward and added flesh to the analytical bones I had constructed. The identification of key theoretical codes brought me to the next step in this stage of my research design, where I moved away from the coding process and focused on qualitative, microlinguistic analysis of selected threads. This close linguistic analysis was operationalised through attention to how particular forms of knowledge about parenting and motherhood were constituted, and what subject positions were available to Mumsnet users in relation to these forms of knowledge. Both language and other digital and semiotic forms were treated as key resources by which individuals could be positioned, or position themselves, in relation to these forms of knowledge and subjectivity. In the section that follows, I detail some of this analysis, showing how contributors to the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread are positioned, and position themselves, in relation to discourses of gendered parenthood. The underlying principle of this analysis, that individuals can be positioned in multiple or contradictory ways by drawing on a range of resources to discursively position themselves and others through interaction, takes influence from Davies and Harré’s (1990) positioning theory.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS: GENDERED PARENTHOOD IN ‘YOUR IDENTITY AS A MOTHER’

Close analysis of the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread led me to identify six discourses that are taken up and negotiated by its contributors (see Mackenzie 2018a for a detailed overview of these and other discourses identified in the Mumsnet study). These discourses are named as follows:

1. gendered parenthood;
2. child-centric motherhood;
3. mother as main parent;
4. absent fathers;
5. equal parenting, and
6. individuality.

The discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’ is identified here as an ‘overarching’ discourse (Sunderland 2000) that takes in the discourses of ‘child-centric motherhood’, ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’. My analysis suggests that these discourses of gendered parenthood all work, in slightly different ways, to fix parents in binary gendered subject positions, as ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’, and to restrict their access to a range of different subject positions. An example of this can be seen in the following posts, where contributors’ use of intensifiers suggests that their position as ‘mothers’ has near total influence over their sense of self and is the only subject position available to them:

Post 3. Cakesonatrain. I think I am almost entirely Mum.

Post 11. EggNChips. As soon as I became a mum, I was 100% mum and loved it...

The discourses that remain: ‘equal parenting’ and ‘individuality’, are arguably not gendered. However, gender is often foregrounded in the constitution of these discourses in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread. The competing relation between gendered and non-gendered discourses of parenthood can be seen in the following extracts, where non-gendered subject positions such as ‘parent’ and ‘person’ are taken up in opposition to the gendered subject position ‘mother’:

Post 15. NotCitrus. I feel much more of a parent than a “mum”

Post 13. Crazym. Hate being identified as “mum”... I have a name!!!! I am a person!!

In this section, I show how the gendered ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’ discourses are taken up in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread, and how both the context of this thread, and the discussion forum as a whole, can make it difficult for contributors to position...
themselves outside of these discourses. I will then show how Mumsnet users take up a discourse that is oppositional and competing in this context: ‘equal parenting’. The analysis that is presented here focuses on participants’ use of categories and pronouns, two linguistic resources that emerged as particularly important for participants’ positioning of themselves and others in relation to discourses of gender and parenthood in this thread.

‘Mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’

In the title and opening post of ‘Your identity as a mother’ (extract 1), pandarific invites contributors to address their self-positioning as ‘mothers’, exploring their ‘experiences’ of motherhood, how motherhood ‘changes’ them, and ‘their view of themselves’. She repeatedly uses the category ‘mum/mother’, which directly indexes gender, together with the second person pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your’, explicitly positioning her audience as female parents. The title of the Mumsnet website itself, of course, deploys the same category; as noted above, this is a site that targets women, even though it is billed as a site by and for parents in general. By offering this category as the obvious, common sense subject position, both the larger site more generally, and the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread specifically, work to exclude parents who do not identify as mothers, such as male parents (and also carers who do not identify as parents), and limit the range of subject positions immediately available to their target demographic. The prevalence of the ‘mum’ category can be said to legitimise an overarching discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’, reinforcing a dichotomous gender divide between ‘male’ and ‘female’ parents.

Extract 1. Opening post to ‘Your identity as a mother’.

pandarific Sun 01-Jun-14 14:43:17
1. I’ve been reading a lot of fiction that deals with motherhood and family relationships
2. and I’m curious as to how it changes people, and their view of themselves. Has your
3. perception of who you are changed since you had children? How much of your identity
4. is bound up with being a mum? Do you think the strength of your desire to be a
5. mum/what stage in your life you had them affected the degree of the changes?

6. For some reason this has come out reading like an exam question - it's not meant to be! Just curious about people’s experiences.

Most contributors to this thread accept the gender-specific agenda set by pandarific. All participants present themselves as women, most identify as mothers, and they tend to respond to the direct second person address of the opening post with first-person singular pronouns such as ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘my’. This pattern can be seen in posts such as cakesonatrain’s (extract 2), which almost exclusively employs first person singular pronouns.

Extract 2. Post 3 to ‘Your identity as a mother’ (first person singular pronouns in italics: my emphasis).

**cakesonatrain** Sun 01-Jun-14 15:07:15

1. I think I am almost entirely Mum. My dc are still both under 3 so there's a lot of
2. physical Mumming to do, with breastfeeding, nappies, carrying, bathing etc. I don't
3. know if it will be less intense when they're older, and I might let myself be a bit more
4. Me again, but right now I am almost refusing to have an identity beyond Mum.
5. I am a bit 'old Me' at work, but I'm part time now so there's less of that too.

Cakesonatrain’s use of the possessive pronoun ‘my’ in this post excludes any others from the ‘ownership’ of her children. She also defines the tasks of ‘breastfeeding, nappies, carrying, bathing etc.’, most of which (except for breastfeeding) can be carried out by any carer, using the gendered term ‘mumming’. Through her creative manipulation of the word ‘mum’, usually found in nominal form, she genders these parenting tasks, excluding a male parent (or indeed any other carer) from potential involvement. Her use of the term ‘breastfeeding’ – a task that is biologically gendered, rather than, for example, the gender-neutral ‘feeding’, together with her positioning of this
gendered act at the beginning of a list of ‘mumming’ tasks, also works to exclude male or other carers by presenting these tasks as gender-specific; integral to the role of ‘mum’.

The predominance of first person singular pronouns in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread is not surprising, given pandarific’s exclusive emphasis on female parents in the title and opening post. But there are several recurring statements that could logically break away from this singular emphasis on contributors themselves, and challenge the terms of the opening post. For example, within the clause ‘I have children’, which recurs in various forms across the thread (see examples below), the pronoun ‘I’ could easily be replaced with ‘we’ or ‘our’ with little change to the content of the post, as it is in the excerpt from post 9.

Post 85. I am expecting *my* first (my emphases)

Post 9. *we* have only one child (my emphasis)

This excerpt from post 9 shows that one contributor to the thread *is* able to challenge the terms of the opening post whilst still offering a relevant response, through her use of plural reference to the self plus a second parent. Overall, however, broader patterns of category and pronoun use across the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread, together with the more specific gendering of parental activities in posts like cakesonatrain’s, work to create the impression that fathers are largely absent from contributors’ lives, and that bringing up children is predominantly the domain of mothers, who have total responsibility for their children. These patterns point to the dominance of a pair of complementary discourses of gendered parenthood that restrict the range of subject positions available to both female and male parents: ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’.

It is important to note at this point that men and fathers are not completely absent from the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread. Exploring moments at which men *are* made relevant, however, reveals that the ‘gendered parenthood’ and ‘mother as main parent’ discourses still dominate in many posts in which fathers are present, such as post 19 (see extract 3).
Extract 3. Post 19 to ‘Your identity as a mother’

MorningTimes Sun 01-Jun-14 20:29:39

1. I agree with cakes - I feel as if I am 99% 'mum' at the moment! I know it will pass
2. though, I am a SAHM [stay-at-home-mum] and am looking after three preschool DC [darling children] all day (plus a fourth who is at school during the day) so I just don't have the time or
3. the energy to be anyone else at the moment.

4. DH [darling husband] does a lot with the children too but at least he has a separate identity
5. because he is out at work and mixes with other people there.

6. I also struggle to spend time away from the DC for more than a night though. I have
7. friends who will happily go abroad on holiday without their DC but I just wouldn't want
8. to do that.

9. In this post, MorningTimes creates a clear physical separation between the main subject of each paragraph: ‘I’ (line 1), ‘DH’ (darling husband; line 5) and ‘I’ (line 7), and uses exclusively singular pronouns when referring to herself or her husband. Through these linguistic and structural resources, MorningTimes positions herself and her husband as separate individuals. Further, her self-positioning in a gendered parental role, as a ‘mum’, through the relational clauses ‘I am 99% ‘mum’” (line 1) and ‘I am a SAHM’ (line 2), contrasts with the positioning of her husband as someone who undertakes parental activities - who ‘does a lot with the children’ (line 5). The acronym ‘SAHM’, further, positions her in the private sphere (‘at home’), whereas she positions her husband in an opposing ‘work’ space. The ‘absent fathers’/ ‘mother as main parent’ discourses do not operate in conjunction here, but it can be said that the ‘part-time father’/ ‘mother as main parent’ discourses (originally identified by Sunderland 2000) do: MorningTimes is the ‘main parent’ who devotes all of her time (‘all day’) and indeed herself (‘I am 99% ‘mum’”) to her children, whilst her husband is the
‘part-time parent’ who devotes much of his time elsewhere (‘he is out at work’), and whose status as a parent determines only what he does, not who he is.

‘Equal parenting’

The analysis that is presented above shows that male parents are largely absent from the discussions of ‘Your identity as a mother’, and that where they are made relevant, they are often positioned as oppositional to female parents, thus legitimising the ‘gendered parenthood’, ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’ discourses. However, there are some contributors to the thread who work to position male parents differently - as part of an equal, stable unit who act jointly. This can be seen in extract 4, where EggNChips uses a wide range of linguistic resources, including inclusive pronouns such as ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘us’ to present herself and her ‘DP’ (darling partner) as a unit with equal parental roles.

Extract 4. Post 11 to ‘Your identity as a mother’

EggNChips Sun 01-Jun-14 18:49:33

1. I was ready to become a mum when I had my DS [darling son], it was well worth waiting for –
2. we’d mellowed as a couple and both completed our post grad courses / worked up to a good place in employment and by the time he arrived, everything felt right.
3. As soon as I became a mum, I was 100% mum and loved it; threw myself in to just that. Then slowly over time, returning to work initially part time, then more or less full time, I’m more "me".
4. I’m of course a mum at home but DP [darling partner] does equal amounts of parenting and between us we allow each other to do our own things (so I play for a sports team, do stuff (sic) the NCT [National Childbirth Trust], and regularly organize a meal out with my girlfriends; he’s training for a sport thing and also meets his friend about an ongoing project). We also try and have a date night or some time on our own once in a while. DS has changed us, but only
12. priorities, rather than us as people.

13. Now DS is 2.8, I’m 50% mum and 50% me, I love my job, love my friends, love Dp, and my
14. sports and there is so much more to me than being a parent.

Although EggNChips begins her post by focusing on herself and whether motherhood has
changed her (‘I was ready to become a mum when I had my DS’), she introduces her partner through
the use of the plural pronoun ‘we’ in line 2. This pattern continues throughout EggNChips’ post. For
example, in the third paragraph (lines 7-12), she begins by focusing on herself ‘as a mum’ and using
the first person pronoun ‘I’ (line 7). As before, however, she follows this reference to self with a
reference to herself and her DP as a unit, through the use of inclusive pronouns (‘us’, ‘we’, ‘each
other’, ‘our’, ‘people’) and a preposition that situates them in close relation to one another
(‘between’). EggNChips goes on to list the ‘things’ that they allow each other to do, and in doing so
presents them each as separate actors: ‘I’ and ‘he’ (lines 8-10). However, her use of lexically and
syntactically similar sentences to list these activities, as in the clauses ‘I play for a sports team’ (line
8) and ‘he’s training for a sport thing’ (lines 9-10), again emphasises the equality between herself
and her partner. These constructions imply that they take part in an equal range of activities outside
of the home, and that their interests are very similar, therefore again positioning them as equal
parents. Her use of the word ‘equal’ (line 7) to qualify the ‘amounts of parenting’ they each do
makes this positioning explicit. By making her ‘DP’ relevant to her response, EggNChips suggests that
‘having children’ is not a one-way relationship between her and her child: it has also involved her
partner. In this way, she positions them both as subjects of a discourse of ‘equal parenting’, which
competes with ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’ by offering female and male parental
subject positions on equal terms.

Despite EggNChips’ claims to parental equality, however, her positioning of her partner is in
many ways not equal, and in some ways works to reinforce the legitimacy of both the ‘gendered
parenthood’ and ‘mother as main parent’ discourses. For example, the pre-clause qualifier ‘of
course’ (line 7) implies that her position as ‘mum’ in the home environment is obvious and taken for granted. Further, in the statement ‘DP does equal amounts of parenting’ (line 7), EggNChips subtly positions herself as the main parent whose contribution is automatically assumed; the standard by which her partner’s parenting contribution is compared. In addition, EggNChips persistently positions herself within the overarching discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’, as a ‘mum’, in the first line of every paragraph in her post. Like MorningTimes, however, she does not position her partner directly as a father or as a parent; he is described as someone who ‘does... parenting’ (line 7). The sample analysis that is presented above shows how users of Mumsnet Talk take up, negotiate and challenge the dominant ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’ discourses in their digital interactions. In response to the central research question ‘how do Mumsnet users position themselves, and how are they positioned, in relation to discourses of gender and parenthood in Mumsnet Talk interactions?’ I have begun to show that, despite moments of resistance and challenge, discourses of gendered parenthood persistently work to position parents as gendered subjects who are either ‘main parents’, ‘absent fathers’ or ‘part-time fathers’. These discursive positions are often realised through referential devices such as categories and pronouns, which have acquired such common sense legitimacy that they are difficult to avoid. The findings that are outlined in this section illustrate some of the demands and expectations that parents experience, showing why, for example, it continues to be difficult for male parents to be positioned as primary carers who make significant sacrifices for their children.

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

This chapter has shown that digital interactions provide fruitful data sources for English Language and Digital Humanities research that explores pressing issues for society such as, in the case of the Mumsnet study, the question of whether mothers can access new and potentially more egalitarian ways of being a parent through their online discussions. As noted at the start of this chapter,
Mumsnet members represent a relatively limited demographic, meaning that insights gained from this study are by no means generalisable to all mothers, or all contexts. The popularity and influence of the forum, however, together with the fact that similar sites exist around the world, suggests that these findings can contribute to better understanding of the ways in which parenthood can be expressed and explored in a digital age.

There are many important social groups and themes that remain under-explored through the study of Mumsnet that is presented here. For example, the experiences of marginalised groups who would otherwise be geographically and temporally disparate can be brought to the fore through the exploration of digital interactions, since digital spaces can offer key sites for such groups to access peer networks and community support. In relation to the theme of parenthood, future research may therefore consider how marginalised and alternative family configurations might be negotiated, and new definitions of the ‘family’ carved out through digital interactions. In addition, developing technologies continue to offer new, emergent and shifting forms of interaction and a wide range of semiotic resources through which these kinds of negotiation may be played out, such as memes (Ross & Rivers 2017; Zappavigna 2012), images and selfies (Zappavigna 2016; Zappavigna & Zhao 2017), sound and music (Machin & van Leeuwen 2016). The continual development of such varied and multiple semiotic modes opens up new ways of relating to others and to society, creating new avenues for future research that explores the significance of digital interactions in our lives.

FURTHER READING


This inter-disciplinary collection focuses squarely on methodology, offering a range of discourse-analytic approaches to the analysis of social media in relation to wider social issues.

This guide is extremely useful for those who are relatively new to the exploration of language and social media (or other digital discourse). It focuses on practical advice and guidance and is interspersed with anecdotes and advice from prominent scholars in the field.


This handbook offers a comprehensive overview of recent theories, methods, contexts and debates in the language-focused study of digital communication.

**RELATED TOPICS**

English Language and Social Media, Critical Discourse Analysis, Mediated Discourse Analysis

**REFERENCES**


Harvey, K., Locher, M. & Mullany, L., 2013. ‘“Can i be at risk of getting AIDS?”: A linguistic analysis of two Internet advice columns on sexual health', *Linguistik Online*, 59(2).


Mackenzie, J., 2017a. “‘Can we have a child exchange?’ Constructing and subverting the “good mother” through play in Mumsnet Talk’, Discourse & Society, 28(3), pp. 296–312.


QSR International Pty Limited, 2012. NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/home


