



# ‘I feel the irritation and frustration all over the body’ Affective ambiguities in networked parenting culture

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## Abstract

This article investigates the affective power of social media by analysing everyday encounters with parenting content among mothers. Drawing on data composed of diaries of social media use and follow-up interviews with six women, we ask how our study participants make sense of their experiences of parenting content and the affective intensities connected to it. Despite the negativity involved in reading and participating in parenting discussions, the participants find themselves wanting to maintain the very connections that irritate them, or even evoke a sense of failure, as these also yield pleasure, joy and recognition. We suggest that the ambiguities addressed in our research data speak of something broader than the specific experiences of the women in question. We argue that they point to the necessity of focusing on, and working through affective ambiguity in social media research in order to gain fuller understanding the complex appeal of platforms and exchanges.

## Keywords

affect, motherhood, networked media, parenting culture, social media

This article examines affective ambiguity regarding social media within the context of online parenting cultures through the experiences of six Finnish women in different stages of motherhood. By examining how our study participants address the affective intensities that emerge when engaging with discussions, posts and comments on parenting and family life, we ask how these experiences feed into the evaluations they

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make concerning the worth of these exchanges and the tactics that they deploy as users of social media. In doing so, we explore affective ambiguities associated with both social media and mothering. Our study participants describe social media as something that irritates, frustrates and amplifies negative affect, and gives rise to guarded and reserved tactics of use while nevertheless not being void of enjoyment. Discussing their practices of ‘hate-following’ and ‘wonderfully passive-aggressive’ reactions, the women address pleasures taken in sensations of dislike even as anticipated hurt can haunt their networked engagements. Affective ambiguities connected to motherhood, again, range from the hopeful anxieties of an expecting mother to the exhausted, frustrated envy experienced by a mother of a child with special needs when faced with parenting tips and posts depicting idyllic family life.

Many scholars have argued that mothers use social media to connect with other parents and that these connections can improve well-being, especially when breastfeeding and possibly suffering from social isolation (e.g. Arnold and Martin, 2016; Johnson and Quinlan, 2015; McDaniel et al., 2012). Other researchers have noted that while social media has increased mothers’ opportunities to voice their experiences, online debates also contribute to divisive rivalry between different mothering philosophies and practices (Abetz and Moore, 2018; Arnold and Martin, 2016: 4). All in all, the ways in which networked parenting exchanges foster connection, empowerment and confidentiality inasmuch as anxiety, shame and judgement make evident the complexity and ambiguity of experiences of mothering in social media (see Abetz and Moore, 2018: 266).

The affective appeal and power of social media have been broadly recognized and analysed, from the formation of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) to the intensities involved in interacting with clusters of users and data (Sampson et al., 2018) and to the diverse ways in which affect is mobilized, manipulated and monetized within the attention economy of social media (Dean, 2010; Karppi, 2018). Affective encounters pull users to platforms, push them to engage and, in moving their bodies from one state to another, alter the ways in which they connect with the world. For Richard Grusin (2010, 127), social media is geared towards the minimization of negative affect in the default reactions of likes and loves. Yet ambiguity runs rife in social media exchanges of all kinds, from participatory reluctance (Cassidy, 2015) to the cultivation of digital resignation (Draper and Turow, 2019), sensations of creepiness connected to the leakage of personal data (Shklovski et al., 2014) and the simultaneously boring and engrossing appeal of apps and sites (Hand, 2017; Petit, 2015).

A basic division between the positive (as that which we tend towards and aim to increase) and the negative (as that which we try to minimize or avoid) has meandered through affect inquiry ever since Baruch Spinoza’s 17th-century consideration of affections as either increasing or diminishing the body’s powers to exist and act. This division has nevertheless never been stable, as ‘the one and the same thing can be at the same time good and bad, and also indifferent’ (Spinoza, 1992 [1677]: 153). It can in fact be argued that ambiguity runs through theorizations of affect, from the work of Spinoza to that of Silvan S. Tomkins, Gilles Deleuze and the plethora of current inquiry. Affect emerges in and gives shape to encounters and relations between bodies (both human and non-human) and makes these matter. It entails a precognitive force that yields more or less contingent connections and affords experience with tone and quality. An affective

intensity that is registered as positive in the sense of adding to one's liveliness can ripple parallel to, intermesh with or even fuel anger, anxiety and shame, just as a sensation can be simultaneously frustrating and startling, sad and enjoyable, flat and engaging (Coleman, 2016).

To discuss affective ambiguity in social media is, perhaps obviously, to address mixed feelings felt towards platforms, topics, discussion threads and other users. If we understand ambiguity as involving the fundamental non-fixity of meaning (de Beauvoir, 1976), it is unavoidable in how we make sense of the world. This may result in a broadly relativist stance acknowledging that as the meaning of things is always both contextual and subjective, it is not something that can be generalized. For us, however, ambiguity leads to key methodological questions concerning complexity and simultaneity in how affect is registered and retrospectively described, and the forms of analysis that are able to hold onto the messiness that this entails. This is an issue of qualitative methodological granularity necessary for tackling datafied culture as it is currently lived and made in cohabitation with networked devices, sites and apps.

## Research context and material

This article is part of a large study examining the affective power of networked parenting culture in Finland. Our inquiry is situated in a context where cultural expectations still favour mothers as primary caregivers. Finland is a Nordic welfare state with heavily subsidized public child care and paid maternal and paternal leave, yet in heterosexual families mothers still use the majority of parental leave available to both parents. Also, most single parents are women (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018). The fact that mothers share children's stories and photos in social media in far greater numbers than fathers is set against a backdrop emphasizing women's emotional parenting work (see Friedman, 2018: 170; Tiidenberg, 2015).

In our mixed-methods approach, study participants' notes on their experiences of social media become objects of reflection. Collected in spring 2020, our research data consist of diaries of social media use and follow-up interviews with six participants aged from 32 to 45 years. The participants were recruited through personal and professional networks using a snowball method. This is a small, cisgender, mostly heterosexual and educated sample of Finnish women in different stages of motherhood, and hence both highly limited and specific. Our data are made up of small stories of motherhood as it takes shape in, and is articulated in relation to social media. Rich, in-depth and rife with nuance, the data offer vignettes into both the ambivalent, affective power of social media and the ways in which parenting norms, expectations and ideals are resisted, negotiated and lived with. Despite their limitations, such personal accounts are among the only available means for empirically tackling affectation and intensity as they become registered (Paasonen, 2015a: 703).

Following Spinoza, affect is the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected in their encounters with the world. It then refers to both the force of encounter and the ways in which this force becomes registered as sensation in specific bodies: affect precedes cognitive processing, yet also becomes its retrospective focus on the level of personal experience. In the interviews and observation diaries comprising our research material, affect

figures much less as a pre-personal force than an ‘intensity owned and recognized’ (Massumi, 2002: 28) that becomes named, interpreted and situated along an emotional spectrum. This shift is significant in foregrounding affect as an object of subjective narration, reflection and contextualization so that it intermeshes with the categories of emotion. The accounts *are*, essentially, about how the women in question feel about social media exchanges, and how these feelings become identified as emotional qualities or states such as sadness, rage and anxiety. This does not mean that they do not speak of affect – it merely means that this study, like all cultural studies inquiry, happens within certain limitations. As affect becomes an object of reflection, the complexity and elusiveness of intensities felt gives way to firmer interpretations. Our inquiry, therefore, is not naïve in assuming that our mixed methods allow access to affect as it is immediately registered: rather, they make it possible to explore how affective complexity is lived with, reflected on and narrated in the context of scholarly inquiry.

The diaries of social media use track participants’ reflections of and reactions to parenting-related content over a period of five days. The participants completed the diaries within 7–10 days. They were given no specific instructions as for length or style other than that they should write in whatever way best suited them, yet open-ended questions were given and the participants were instructed to particularly reflect on their feelings and experiences connected to social media mothering content. The study participants were asked to describe their experiences in as great detail as possible with question prompts such as: Why and how did particular content make you react and stay on the site for a longer period of time, or to leave very quickly? How did you feel? Did the situation evoke any physical sensations? By outlining an interpretative structure on otherwise unstructured data, we were able to trace ‘reflexive practice of a particular, rather than completely general, nature’ (Markham and Couldry, 2007: 680; see also Bell, 1998).

The combination of diaries and interviews encourages reflexivity on the part of both participants and researchers, and gives the former greater influence over the interview agenda (Davies, 1991; Pillow, 2003). Lucy Spowart and Karen Nairn (2014: 328, 337) argue that this methodological combination allows for additional insight into personal experience and facilitates the sharing of ‘emotional data’. Diaries enable the participants to express themselves in the style and at the time of their own choosing, which alters the power dynamics of the interview situation (Markham and Couldry, 2007). In our study, the diaries allowed participants to reflect on their experiences without the presence of a researcher, giving rise to accounts most likely differing from those that could have been produced in interviews.

If diaries are seen as performances of subjectivity, then follow-up interviews are re-performances or re-enactments of said subjectivity, where participants reflect on their feelings and reactions in writing (Latham, 2003; Spowart and Nairn, 2014: 329–30). The interviews were conducted soon after the study participants finished their diaries, which were used to structure the open-ended questions. These were combined with the method of ‘scroll-back’, developed by Brady Robards and Sian Lincoln (2017), where study participants browse their social media history together with the researcher(s) in an interview context. The method was designed to study transformations in social media use over time and to explore the longitudinal nature of digital traces. While developed for studying Facebook in particular, it can be applied to any social media platform involving persistent records of posts, photos and other disclosures (Møller and Robards, 2019: 105).

The interviews lasted between 42 and 65 minutes. Participants were asked some background information and a series of open-ended questions about their experiences of parenting-related social media, such as ‘give an example of social media parenting content that evoked strong feelings’, ‘describe your post’, ‘how does it feel to see that post now’. These interlaced with follow-up questions on the reactions and experiences described in the diaries. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for thematic analysis, and participants were invited to choose pseudonyms of their own liking. The diaries and interview transcripts were analysed from the bottom up by coding them for the affective intensities addressed and the specific moments and contexts that these emerged in.

The participants describe their approaches and attachments to social media – Facebook, Instagram and blogs being the most used among them – as composed of seemingly incompatible affective threads that both pull them toward mediated exchanges and push them away in persistent irritation and frustration. Ambivalent, mixed feelings coexist when interest is described as being spiked with resentment and anger, and when instances of joy are laced with lingering sensations of vulnerability and hurt. Our data then necessitate attending to the ambiguity of affect, namely the interlacing and intermeshing of contradicting and seemingly incompatible intensities in networked exchanges. These narrations of mixed feeling are retrospective interpretations of intensities felt, and reflections concerning their shape and meaning, and they broaden to evaluations made of other people’s social media habits, platform cultures and social media in general. In the following, we examine this ambiguity through the analytical lenses of *experience*, *evaluation* and *tactics* in order to unpack how it is articulated in the research data and what the study participants make of it. Starting from the participants’ descriptions of their experiences of parenting content, we move to considering how these feed evaluations made concerning the value and importance of social media in the context of mothering, as well as the tactics of use that they deploy in tackling this all. In doing so, we map out both the affective intensities described and the judgements made and the user positions taken on their basis.

## Experiences

In our research data, social media connectivity involves constant negotiations over individual agency. The diaries and follow-up interviews describe women as engaging with platforms within shifting intensities of irritation, amusement, anxiety, boredom, anger, happiness, joy and pleasure. The resulting affective tapestry is complex, dense and ambiguous. Thirty-two-year-old Elisa, who at the time of the interview was pregnant with her first child, describes having been wary of parenting-related social media content, especially Facebook groups for expectant mothers, as others had ‘instigated the idea that those mother groups can be a little distressing, scary’. Elisa suffers from panic disorder and used to belong to an online mental health support group that ‘fed those panic feelings’:

I got ideas from it. Like when someone said they experienced a panic attack at the hairdresser, and I read it and was like ‘I’ve never got one at the hairdresser, could I have a panic attack there?’ And then of course the next time I went to the hairdresser I thought about it a lot.

Anticipating negative affect, Elisa hesitated to join ‘mom groups’ as this might result in affective pre-tuning of being ‘affected by just the mere anticipation of affective intensity’ (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018: 4):

I was afraid that there’d be . . . for example, a lot of discussion about symptoms. Like there’s this and this stomach pain and some . . . dizziness, headache, whatever. Because I know that I’m sensitive to observing my body all the time, how it feels. That I’d begin to notice the same symptoms in myself even more. And I’d worry more about them.

Elisa’s experience demonstrates the power of affective patterns, and how affect emerges in relational histories made of repeated connections, narratives and body routines (see Kinnunen and Kolehmainen, 2019: 45; Wetherell, 2012: 121). While immediate, affect is also contextually bound, and hence fundamentally social (Ahmed, 2004). For Elisa, social media is an amplifier of negative affect, which results in reluctance of use. For Raisa, a 44-year-old mother of two elementary school children, one of whom has learning difficulties, social media is similarly a site of anticipated hurt that she nevertheless actively and habitually engages with. Raisa explains that she feels she has failed her own expectations as a mother, and that ‘the parenting talk of social media throws gasoline into the flames’. Raisa began her observation diary by reflecting on her feelings about Mother’s Day:

Friends and other people I follow were praising how wonderful motherhood is. And sharing photos of their lovely breakfasts and cards made by the kids. I looked at the chaotic kitchen table full of dirty dishes and the vase with branches. I took a picture of the chaos and, for a while, considered uploading it on Facebook. That, here’s my Mother’s Day idyll. At the beginning of the day, I just breathed deeply, and force-liked updates and pics from close friends. Heart, heart, heart, heart, thumb, heart . . . Until at some point self-pity and anger started to rise in my head. Do you really always have to have it so fucking great?

Raisa’s account of ‘force-liking’ points to the ubiquity of negative and mixed affect in social media (Paasonen, 2015b), as well as to the ways in which platforms encourage positive interaction rituals in front of networked audiences (Eranti and Lonkila, 2015). It is evident that following other parents and their domestic self-presentations online makes Raisa feel vulnerable. Scholars have suggested that social media triggers social comparison that causes users to relate other people’s perceived achievements to those of their own, and to believe that others have it better (Lee, 2014; Mackson et al., 2019: 2164; Vannucci et al., 2017). The social context of mothering can amplify such networked sensibility. In a recent study investigating parental burnout among Finnish parents, Matilda Sorkkila and Kaisa Aunola (2020) note that high social expectations in particular increase the risk of mothers’ exhaustion.

Our data speak of mothers not only comparing their parenting success with but also passing judgement on their peers on social media. This connects with the popular discourse of ‘mommy wars’ that originally described antagonisms between working and stay-at-home mothers in the US, and which has more recently come to refer to competition between mothers over parenting philosophies and choices more generally (Abetz and Moore, 2018; Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Lehto and Kaarakainen, 2016). Participants in

networked exchanges have a sense of audience, often imagined in order to appropriately present themselves (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Reluctance to be judged in this context may explain why mothers prefer to suppress and manage affective ambiguity through performances of ‘hearts and thumbs’, no matter how forced these may be.

Much like Raisa, Eeva, a 41-year-old full-time single parent of three teenage children, notes her negative reactions growing as Mother’s Day content started to appear in her Instagram feed. ‘The irritation is felt all over the body: the heart is beating and the hands tremble! Why even read these?’, she writes in her observation diary. Eeva admits feeling ‘bitterness’ when she reads about two-parent families while also being immensely annoyed by what she calls the ‘single parents, poor them’ –narrative. Eeva’s affective responses are telling of norms connected to family structure and the complex pressures that these put on mothers as promises impossible to fill (cf. Berlant, 2011). Her description of visceral reaction to social media is very similar to that written by Iris, a 36-year-old mother of a 1-year-old when describing her reactions to her friends comparing their experiences of mothering: ‘I feel the irritation and frustration all the way in my body, and sometimes I get shaky because I’m so upset.’

Despite a range of negative feelings, our study participants are engaged in social media parenting culture as it also affords pleasure and joy. Some describe being moved by Facebook’s memory feature feeding back previous posts (see also Migovski and Araújo, 2019; Paasonen, 2016). Others speak warmly of confidential discussions with friends and Raisa compliments a blogger whose texts make ‘you feel that you’re not alone in this awful shit, and others have challenges, too’. Elisa, who initially feared that joining mom groups would ‘evoke social pressure and anxiety’, joined a Facebook birth group only to notice that it consisted mainly of boring conversations on baby clothes and other merchandise. Instead of reading content that she considers ‘pointless’, she has come to miss ‘proper wallowing in bad feelings’ and ‘real conversation’. This serves as yet another example of how intensities of feeling that may appear solely flattening and dark can be terribly appealing, or at least cut through by slivers of interest and joy.

## Evaluations

In addition to recounting their mixed feelings about social media use, our study participants write and speak of evaluations they make concerning the value and purpose of different platforms, and the actions of their friends and other contacts online. In these accounts, affective intensities give way to broader judgements made of networked cultures of mothering, and of the role and purpose of social media in everyday life. The degree to which these judgements are based on feeling may seem to echo the view of emotion as an issue of evaluation or appraisal, influential in cognitive theories of emotion since the 1960s (e.g. Prinz, 2004; Robinson, 2005). In framing experience as synonymously affective, cognitive, and somatic, we take a somewhat different analytical route, where affective intensities are seen to orient and align, re-orient and re-align bodies, and to contribute to positions taken towards people, platforms, posts and arguments. Here, affect is part and parcel of how the value of social media becomes perceived in routines of everyday life, as well as that which is key to attaching users to sites, discussions and social connections.

Eeva speaks of the value and purpose of social media performance by arguing that it is not enough to simply open up about one's experiences of and feelings about parenting: one needs to also, in one way or another, 'succeed in front of an audience'. This is a matter of skill as even 'harmless' updates on funny incidents can be annoying if 'they're somehow clumsily written' and 'evoke shame on behalf of the one doing the updating'. Eeva also argues that some of her Facebook friends do not understand that her updates are deliberately exaggerated for humorous effect, as they 'lack the ability to read such sarcastic updates and take them literally and react completely wrong'. Such clashing of social worlds causes annoyance and 'puts everyone in a bit of an embarrassing situation'. Negative affect is multiplied by the 'second-hand' embarrassment that Eeva feels for those who reveal their ignorance, and by concerns over how her posts represent her 'as a person and a mother' if 'someone takes everything literally'. Her discussion of 'success' connects to how social media bring together different social connections and flatten out potential audiences in degrees of 'context collapse' (Marwick and boyd, 2011). It can be hard to navigate such conflation as tensions surface between different experiences, expectations and personalities, and amplify when tapping into social norms that differently valorize relationships, family models and parenting styles as mundane operations of biopolitics.

Stiina, a 45-year-old new non-birth mother in a same-sex relationship, joined a birth month Facebook group when her partner was pregnant. Her initial interest was soon replaced by irritation, frustration and degrees of amusement and detachment, and she was particularly critical of the heteronormative ways in which gender roles were discussed in the group:

What remained was a feeling that women maintain the men-against-women pattern, men aren't even assumed to participate in parenting in the same way, and the normative notion that all expectant mothers have a man as their spouse. Realizing this reinforced my own sense of being an outsider in the group, and reinforced the sense that I belong to a different kind of family. (Observation diary)

Many first-time mothers turn to the internet as parenting is a new experience of which they have little or no previous knowledge. As with Stiina, such search for peer support can nevertheless result in feelings of exclusion and critical assessments made of the politics of inclusion involved: not all get to participate in the same way, or to similarly impact the terms of exchange. Such mundane affective inequalities are 'a site of injustice' for those lacking recognition in society (Cantillon and Lynch, 2017: 181; see also Rodó de Zárate, 2015). Despite the growing social acceptance of LGBTQ+ families in Finland, heteronormative and cisnormative presumptions about families remain both influential and widely circulated (e.g. Alasuutari, 2020: 105). Stiina does not care to take part in the group's conversations, arguing that she and her partner have 'never even liked any of the posts'. Considering how she feels about the group's discussion culture, the idea of taking part in order to question the norms that irritate her speaks of 'a double requirement posed on LGBTQ people by a normative society' (Alasuutari, 2020: 108), namely the expectation to disclose details of one's life in order to promote social change, and to endure the reactions that this may evoke.

Though most of our study participants have looked for peer support online, their attitudes towards discussion cultures of mothering remain guarded. The seemingly constant flow of conflicting insight can be overwhelming, adding yet another layer of imposed vigilance on the heavily monitored experiences of pregnancy (Johnson and Quinlan, 2019: 70) and early motherhood. Iris has misgivings about unsolicited and ‘annoying’ advice by other mothers (see also Chalklen and Anderson, 2017), whereas Tina, a 38-year-old mother of two, a special needs teenager and a child in elementary school, has the opposite experience of trying to give advice herself. Stiina speaks of her astonishment over the topics that other mothers choose to discuss in a Facebook birth group and expresses concern for the people seeking advice there:

Don't they have anyone to talk to about those things? There's been, for example, a photo of pretty horrible-looking feet that were so swollen that I'd go to the clinic immediately. . . I mean, what kind of relationships do you have, friends or relatives? Don't you have anyone else with whom you can contemplate this? You're asking people you don't know about naming your child, and everything. It somehow feels absurd.

Bethany L. Johnson and Margaret M. Quinlan (2019: 8) point out that expert advice directed at mothers is often contradictory and swiftly changing, and that social media platforms both support and interrupt the dissemination of expertise. Lay experts can engender maternal anxiety by presenting unhelpful or inaccurate advice (see Johnson and Quinlan, 2019: 198) and any expertise involves the question of social norms and gatekeeping through which certain experiences, values, and choices are cast as being of lesser value, and possibly wrong. Tina's idea of taking a self-defence course in order to cope with a violent child, for example, was met with outrage in a support group for the parents of special needs children. This speaks of incompatible and conflicting views on what constitutes desirable peer support or suitable advice in any larger social media group, as well as of the conditions under which the giving of advice, as quotidian expertise, becomes viable. Evaluations concerning the value of peer advice come steeped in affect as the issue ultimately concerns the perceived value of individual experiences and ways of doing motherhood, upon which such advice is built. This then boils down to how one's agency as a mother is evaluated, judged, valued, recognized and accepted by others in ways feeding persistent vulnerability.

## Tactics

Both accounts of user experience and evaluations made concerning networked cultures of parenting tap into the tactics of use deployed by the women contributing to our study. Ranging from practices of curating and editing to routines of unfollowing and decisions on how to comment or not, social media users largely aim to predict and minimize negative affect on the basis of previous experience while also trying to fuel positive exchanges. At the same time, given the degree to which our study participants describe their social media uses as being steeped in, or even fuelled by affective ambiguity, the intensities of negative and positive affect can seldom be neatly distinguished.

One obvious tactic involves self-presentation and affective management as the means of crafting more productive engagements. Iris describes the difficulty of switching roles

in easily polarizing debate and occupying an ‘overtly relaxed’ role in order to ease the tensions that emerge when her friends draw comparisons between their children or experiences of mothering. Her tactic is one of forced empathy where sensations of frustration, exhaustion, irritation and puzzlement are hidden under a veneer of warm understanding. This takes work, as Iris describes herself as temperamental and her reactions to people disagreeing with her as visceral in their physical, infuriating and frustrating impact.

For her part, Raisa feels the obligation to react positively to her friends’ parenting posts, even if these irritate or cause feelings of inferiority: ‘so it pisses me off, but I have to put in a heart or a thumb’. This affective conflict manifests bodily as a feeling in her chest, as the grinding of her teeth and a pressure felt in her head, ‘or then if it’s absolutely like, oh no *bloody fucking hell*, what now, then I do get like a hot feeling in my head’ (laughs for a long time). The labour of manipulating, predicting and suppressing affect has been associated with mommy blogs aiming to sell sponsored products (Cummings, 2019). In the exchanges described by our study participants, affective labour comes across as the casual and perpetual maintenance of quotidian sociability that both exhausts and affords joy when exchanges manage to take a desired turn.

In a straightforward and broadly deployed tactic of use, people choose which themes, topics and platforms they engage with to start with, and how. In an interview, Iris describes the antagonism of parenting debates as being such that she opts out from any public exchanges beyond reading comments and putting ‘a heart or a thumb in all those I agree with. To make the right opinion according to me more visible (laughs). It’s wonderfully passive-aggressive.’ Raisa talks of ‘liking the ones that seem sensible’ and using the ‘wow’ button when someone ‘throws in some completely insane comment’:

Like that kind of sarcastic wow, oh no goddamn. I use that hate emoticon quite rarely. Mainly that, oh, yes fuck now, you did throw in an incredible comment – I can sarcastically use that wow emoticon. Kind of like, I’ve liked those who agree with me and disliked those who talk shit in order to bolster my opinion. (laughs)

Reaction buttons and emoticons are, on the one hand, an issue of affective alignment as a means of expressing mutual feeling or agreement. On the other hand, they are rife with the kind of ambiguity that has haunted the use of smileys in online exchanges since the 1970s (Highfield, 2018; Matamoros-Fernández, 2018; Paasonen, 2015b) despite – or perhaps better, due to – their seeming simplicity. Affective complexity, irony or sarcasm are not easily contained in their expressive range, yet as our study participants point out, reactions are about expressing support in ways both spontaneous and forced, as well as about expressing mockery and contempt through the seemingly neutral option of a startled ‘wow’.

Our study participants describe unfriending, unfollowing, hiding content and using separate accounts as their tactics of boundary management, illustrating the centrality of disconnection within modes of social media connectivity (Light, 2014). For instance, Stiina describes herself as a Facebook ‘cleaner’. This cleaning includes hiding the posts of those friends who share annoying content, unfriending people who ‘aren’t relevant for me’ and keeping only ‘those who are equipped with certain values’. Such disconnective tactics, seemingly paradoxically, seek to maintain connections by securing continued engagement (Cassidy and Light, 2014: 1180–2).

Other tactics of use described in our research data include the careful management, editing and curation of social media presence. Through the scroll-back method, we asked our study participants to look back and reflect on their social media uses in early motherhood. This inspired the longest conversations with the women who had older children, and who would travel back in time to events and memories arousing a range of feelings from loss and sadness to joy and elation. In particular, the women spoke of the personal value of social media as archives of memory subject to editing, reorganization and removal (also Robards and Lincoln, 2017: 717). Scrolling back, Tina encountered photos of her child's birthday just before she and her husband got divorced; the most sensitive updates from the time of the actual breakup were set only for her closest friends to see. In the aftermath of a difficult divorce, Eeva deleted her whole preceding Facebook history as 'a kind of purification ritual':

I'd disclosed a lot of things and then at one point I thought I didn't want to open up about those and that's when I started deleting something. And then I thought, well, I'll remove everything. And now when memory is relying on Facebook that sends me these . . . these memory things almost daily, my memory exists from year 2013. (laughs)

The tactic of casual, constant curation was discussed throughout the interviews. On Instagram, Stiina's focus is on maintaining a visually and thematically coherent feed. The account is 'very systematically just art and my dog, and that's the point'. Iris too is rather particular about curating her social media presence and she rarely posts pictures on her Instagram wall. Instead, she publishes Stories that are 'faster to do' and offer a lower threshold for posting 'all kinds of shitty memes and opening up about stuff'. Both women also have extra, currently unused Instagram accounts that they have considered reactivating. Stiina has thought about posting more pictures of her child and the other account would allow 'more of that freedom'. In turn, Iris has been tempted to use her second, public account to be more vocal in societal parenting debates. These tactics can be conceptualized as the use of both symbolic and practical control over one's social media spaces (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008; Lincoln and Robards, 2016). Symbolic control means choosing how to perform the self through disclosures such as keeping up a visually and thematically coherent presence while practical control involves strategic decisions on who to give access to the content posted and shared (Lincoln and Robards, 2016: 932).

When writing her observation diary, Raisa faced and eventually avoided another comparison trap as the school year came to an end. Much like Mother's Day, the end of the semester is a special milestone, not only for children but also their parents. According to Raisa, those whose offspring do well in school or get diplomas for good behaviour celebrate their children's accomplishments on social media while the parents of less academically or socially apt children are left feeling inadequate. Determined to take part in this rite of passage without discussing her children's performance, Raisa took a picture of them and posted it on Facebook:

I have beautiful children. I made them laugh. Many people have liked the picture. Not a word about good diplomas or scholarships or the lack thereof. It felt good. I knew how to position

myself. The rug wasn't pulled from under my feet this year. I felt joy that I took the lead and Facebook followed.

In describing successful risk management and self-presentation, Raisa addressed ambivalent affective attachments to a platform that contributes to her ways of being in the world. In another example of successful social media use, Tina, who also has a special needs child, experienced a distinct type of relief in having outdone an opponent. In the observation diary, she describes a minor debate on dealing with misbehaving teens:

I already started to grow anxious. Like, oh, did I have to go and intervene again, especially when one woman started talking about mollycoddling. I came up with a couple of sharp responses, and the relief was great when my comments started to garner likes.

Both Tina and Raisa address likes as indicators of successful social media participation in environments rich in peer pressure and negative feeling. Despite the aggression that Raisa associates with her own 'force-liking' of posts, likes received in return seem to involve no similar ambiguity.

## Conclusions

As Lauren Berlant (2011) argues, people affectively invest in settings that increase their pain and attach them to the very source of their suffering (also Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018: 6). We can embrace that which keeps us from thriving, feel visceral resentment toward that which adds to our well-being, or enjoy the bittersweetness of things (Vaccaro et al., 2020). Fans can love media products or intensely engage in enjoyable 'hate-watching' with what they dislike or even despise (Click, 2019).

This double bind is evident in our research data where affective intensities feed into, and are inseparable from reflections and evaluations made of social media and one's own participation within it. Despite the persistent, often sharp negativity involved in parenting discussions, our study participants describe themselves wanting to maintain the very connections that irritate and frustrate them, and even evoke a sense of failure. In narrating the pull of social media, Iris admits that, despite having decided to not 'get entangled in everything' and not wanting 'to take a stand', she wants to 'do this so badly'. Eeva similarly describes stumbling upon irritating parenting Facebook content 'accidentally and unintentionally' and, despite 'expecting the worst', still taking part in conversations as 'even if you know that this isn't going to end well, you still for some reason have to do it'.

Steeped as they are in affective complexity and ambiguity, our study participants' tactics of use involve 'participatory reluctance', which Elija Cassidy (2015: 2615) defines as voluntary engagement with social media 'when we would actually prefer not to or would rather do so under altered circumstances'. Participatory reluctance speaks of an orientation to social media where binarized notions of connection and disconnection fail to make sense (Cassidy, 2015: 2614). As such, it is descriptive of how mothers engage with platforms and parenting debates even when having multiple misgivings about them. Such orientations are simultaneously about connections and distances and guarded, reflexive tactics of participation.

We suggest that the ambiguities addressed in our research data speak of something broader than the specific experiences of our six study participants. We argue that they point to the necessity of focusing on, and working through affective ambiguity in order to gain fuller understanding of the intensities that drive and impact engagements with social media. There is persistent stickiness to platforms even as users are apprehensive and hesitant about engaging with them, or find themselves shaking with anger. Here, nuggets of joy emerge amidst irritation and anxiety as users are captivated by exchanges in states of simultaneous stuckness and attraction that both dull and enliven bodies.

The uses of social media are part and parcel of routines of everyday life which, for Ben Highmore (2004: 307), both weigh people down and afford quotidian rhythm and intensity of experience. Like the routines of everyday life more broadly, those connected to social media are ambiguous while also being specifically patterned by the engagement options, social conventions and information architectures of the platforms used. Social media inquiry needs a vocabulary attuned to such ambiguity, if it is to attend to the paradoxical roles that platforms play in shaping everyday life.

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