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Online communities and entrepreneuring mothers: practices of building, being and belonging

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ABSTRACT

Informed by contributions of Professor Alistair Anderson to the social perspective of entrepreneurship, rooted in social relationships and social capital, this article examines how members of an online community collectively interpret and negotiate the challenges of pursuing entrepreneurship alongside parenthood. This article adopts a multi-staged research design, incorporating netnography, participant observation, and qualitative semi-structured interviews. The analysis reveals the critical role of networking in how entrepreneuring women construct and maintain community connections and distinguishes between three dimensions of community engagement: *Building*, *Being* and *Belonging*. Drawing on communities of practice as an analytical lens, we offer new insights into the form and function of communal entrepreneurial practices facilitated by the digital environment.

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Introduction

In his inspirational works, Professor Alistair Anderson envisioned entrepreneurship as a phenomenon that is multi-faceted, a complex social construct that could be enacted in a variety of contexts by different actors. Many of his articles define entrepreneurship as the creation or extraction of value (Alvarez and Busenitz 2001; Diochon and Anderson 2011; Gaddefors and Anderson 2017) that emerges from connections to, and between, processes, people and places (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2012) and relies on relatedness and interaction of these elements. Prior research has established that entrepreneurship is produced in social interactions (Chell, 2000); and that entrepreneurship relies on change in the context of the opportunity as well as the outcomes that it produces (Jack, Dodd, and Anderson 2008). Alistair Anderson (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2012; Gaddefors and Anderson 2017) also noted that the context shapes the entrepreneurs, whilst the entrepreneurs also shape the context through entrepreneurial actions and practices, something he referred to as entrepreneuring. Entrepreneuring can also be defined as efforts to bring about new economic, social, institutional, and cultural environments through the actions of an individual or a group of individuals (Rindova et al. 2009). Professor Anderson drew his inspiration from the perspective that entrepreneurship is a socially situated, collective practice (Johannisson 1988).

In this paper, we take our inspiration from the totality of Alistair Anderson's contributions to the field of entrepreneurship scholarship and adopting a social science perspective, we focus on a specific set of entrepreneurial actors – women, who are mothers, who engage in entrepreneuring.

The profile of the quintessential entrepreneur has been represented as the heroic male (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Ahl and Marlow 2012; Marlow and McAdam 2015), who is driven solely by economic gain (Ahl and Marlow 2012). Accordingly, little is known about the processes that underpin successful identity management and adaptation for women entrepreneurs in general and entrepreneuring mothers in particular who must negotiate their affiliation with multiple and not always complimentary domains of social accountability (Ekinsmyth 2013).

The field of entrepreneurial identity adaptation represents a dynamic and rapidly developing area within women's entrepreneurship (Chasserio, Pailot, and Poroli 2014; García and Welter 2013; Hoang and Gimeno 2010; Swail and Marlow 2018; Meek and Wood 2016). Such scholarly endeavours have underscored that the challenges associated with reconciling the incongruent identities of being an entrepreneur and its associated masculine identity and being a mother are also influenced by social expectations of women. This is of significance as becoming an entrepreneur for mothers shifts the importance from the identity negotiation towards acceptance through identity reconciliation (Swail and Marlow 2018; Radu-Lefebvre et al. 2021; Duberley and Carrigan 2013; Ekinsmyth 2011).

Within this article, we are specifically interested in how online communities may support identity adaptation for entrepreneuring mothers. Building on key scholarly contributions by Anderson and Gaddefors (2016) which presents entrepreneurship as a community phenomenon and the communities of practice literature (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1999; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002), we argue that (CoP) theory provides a useful analytical frame as it seeks to explain how individuals learn through co-participation in the shared and situated practices of their 'lived-in' world. This is particularly relevant for entrepreneuring mothers who may face significant practical and psychological barriers to belonging that may hinder their participation in more traditional business networks and entrepreneurial communities. We view CoPs as places where shared interests and passion drive social interaction between individuals and interactions are replete with opportunities for social learning and identity negotiation (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1999; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). Accordingly, the aim of this article is to examine how entrepreneuring mothers create and maintain community connections in an online environment that may facilitate the development of entrepreneurial competencies, support identity adaptation and potentially reconcile role tension.

The empirical setting for our study is Mumsnet.com, the UK's biggest online community for parents, which attracts 9.4 million unique visitors per month (Mumsnet 2017). Within its Mumsnet Talk section, the network hosts a range of discussion topics. We conceptualize the specific thematic discussion groups that are focused on start-ups and business as a community of practice (Wenger 1999); we do so because Mumsnet.com enables individuals to congregate – united by common goals and meaning – and to share knowledge and act collectively via agreed modes of communication (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1999). Aligning to our research aim, we adopt a multi-staged research design, incorporating participant observations (Spradley 1980) at Workfest – a physical event organized and promoted by Mumsnet (Jorgensen 1989; Gaddefors and Anderson 2017); a series of qualitative interviews with delegates and contributors attending Workfest, and elements of a netnographic approach to examine online community interactions (Kozinets 2002, 2019).

Within this article, we offer the following theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on entrepreneurship as a community phenomenon (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016) by revealing how social media platforms provide opportunities for women to collectively interpret and navigate the challenges they encounter in combining parenthood and entrepreneurship. In so doing, we propose a conceptual model of three overlapping domains of community engagement akin to ontological processes in entrepreneurship (Wade, Smith, and Anderson 2003), building (productive networking and information exchange), belonging (support and social anchorage) and being (identity adaptation and self-narrative co-creation). Second, we contribute to the literature on entrepreneurial identity (Ladge, Clair, and Greenberg 2012; Stryker and Burke 2000; Watson 2009) by illuminating

patterns of engagement in an online community associated with ongoing identity adaptation of entreprenuring mothers. We identify the specific characteristics of the community host and of the supporting technology that combine to alleviate identity dissonance and facilitate self-disclosure.

This paper is structured as follows: It commences with a discrete analysis of the key theoretical constructs at the intersection of entrepreneurship and motherhood pertaining to identity adaptation, the online environment and entrepreneurial communities of practice. This is followed by its methodological rationale and method. We then present a critical evaluation of our empirical evidence. Finally, we consider the implications of the arguments presented in terms of the contribution to women's entrepreneurship research and practice and conclude with recommendations for future research.

Our theoretical framework

Identity, entrepreneurship and motherhood

Historically, entrepreneurship has been viewed as a male activity, with Connell (1995) presenting conceptions of the entrepreneur through the lens of hegemonic masculinity (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio 2004; Collinson and Hearn 1996; Dodd and Anderson 2007). Critics of the inherently individualistic perspective of 'entrepreneur as a hero' (Anderson and Warren 2011) contest this notion through linking the socially constructed notions of gender and entrepreneurial practice as a gendered practice, thereby describing entrepreneurship as a set of processes that position entrepreneurial actors – 'men' and 'women' within the business practice as 'entrepreneurs' (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio 2004), hence shifting the gaze towards the performative aspects of these processes. With regard to 'gender as a performance', it is important to highlight the relevance of the 'gender display' perspective developed by Goffman (1976) which precedes the 'doing gender' perspective adopted in studies of entrepreneurship (Butler 1990; Gherardi 1995; Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987), which in fact specifies that gender is a socially embedded practice and not an individual biological attribute.

Employing a social construction perspective reflects the appreciation that entrepreneurs can be understood better in their social milieu (Dodd and Anderson 2007). The experience of traversing a complex entrepreneurial landscape, where women are positioned as the 'other' (Ahl and Marlow 2012; Oseen 1997) whilst maintaining a coherent sense of self may be particularly difficult. According to Watson (2009), the entrepreneurial identity is a cultural stereotype; with the cultural stereotype of an entrepreneur marked by masculinity (Giazizoglu and Down 2017; Ufuk and Özgen 2001). Indeed, the image of a white middle-aged male typifies the entrepreneurial identity in most theoretical and practical discussions (Marlow and McAdam 2015; McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2020). Despite this, little is known about the processes that underpin successful identity management and adaptation for women entrepreneurs. Such identity negotiation may be particularly challenging for entreprenuring mothers who must negotiate their affiliation with multiple and not always complimentary domains of social accountability (Ekinsmyth 2013). While not all mothers who set up businesses around children choose to identify with a distinctive entrepreneurial category, this work highlights the value of feminized worker-identity positions inasmuch as they enable group-identity formation.

Identity theory is a social psychological theory that emerged from structural symbolic interactionism (Burke and Stets 2009; Stryker and Burke 2000). From this perspective, the self is fundamentally inter-subjective: as Baldauf, Develotte, and Ollagnier-Beldame (2017) argue, the answer to the question, 'who am I' can only be understood in comparison to a 'you'. Identity management requires an engagement in ongoing impression management, as individuals position themselves in alignment or opposition to others according to both internalized social norms and individual beliefs and values (Swan 2002; Stryker and Burke 2000). Weber and Mitchell's (2008, 44) term 'identities-in-action' aptly captures the extent to which identity is something we do, not who we are; a very real form of work – especially when tensions arise between different or conflicting identity positions during major life transitions.

According to Ladge, Clair, and Greenberg (2012), liminal periods like the transition to motherhood require considerable identity adaptation, as women seek to reconcile professional and maternal identities and minimize identity dissonance. Such identity adaptation can be understood in relation to the dynamic interplay between one's own self-reflection (i.e. self-identity) and engagement with the 'cultural, discursive or institutional notions' that define one's selves (i.e. social identities) (Watson 2008, 131). This relational view recognizes identity as a fluid ongoing project that is shaped through discourse (Anderson, Park, and Jack 2007; Watson 2009). Entrepreneurial mothers are further obliged to negotiate the dissonance between their ascribed femininity and the masculinity inherent within entrepreneurship. Indeed, Duberley and Carrigan (2012) have highlighted the incompatibility of a normative entrepreneurial identity and attachment to parenting ideals. Whereas the pursuit of work–life balance is often cited by successful female entrepreneurs as justification for the pursuit of an entrepreneurial career path, this is rarely achieved in practice (Eddleston and Powell 2012) and mothers' entrepreneurial ambitions may be stifled by geographically and temporally restrictive domestic routines (Ekinsmyth 2013). Therefore, entrepreneurship for mothers is not just an activity (building a business) but also a significant and sustained identity project (becoming an entrepreneur) (Warren 2004). Marks (2021, 19) identifies 'being able to consider yourself a good mother' as one explicit gendered 'reward' of entrepreneurship that is often a key component of some of the more contrived performances of successful female entrepreneurs who are often invited to act as role models to promote female entrepreneurship. However, as Marks argues convincingly, a woman's life and goals are apt to change faster than their business's; thus, it is important that psychological rewards such as identity congruity (Eikhof, Summers, and Carter 2013) do not overshadow the importance of sustainable financial business performance or create a false promise for aspirant entrepreneurs (Ahl and Marlow 2021).

Communities of practice – the relationship between practice, identity, belonging and meaning

The examination of entrepreneurial activity through the lens of community highlights the collaborative nature of entrepreneurship and underscores its social embeddedness (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016; Jennings and Brush 2013). According to communities of practice theory, the production of knowledge is the result of situated, contextual and social engagement with practices and learning (Lesser and Storck 2001; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). This is particularly appropriate when considering entrepreneurship, which research has shown to be both embedded in and shaped by multiple structural and institutional contexts including family and gender (Aldrich and Cliff 2003; Brush, De Bruin, and Welter 2009; Marlow and Martinez Dy 2018).

Seen as a community-based phenomenon, entrepreneurship is embedded in the place, and it is being continuously recreated and moulded in interactions between social practices and the spatial environment (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016; Cresswell 2013). Indeed, in their view, place can be viewed as a community, and they argue that places are the source of community persistence. From sociology, we know that community is intrinsically connected with place (Barrett 2014) and therefore exhibits the characteristics of propinquity, population stability and continuous interaction patterns. Indeed, places have the ability to shape the agency and offer structure to its participants. Whilst the communities may be seen as places where people connect and interact, communities also develop as social entities with connections that can be greater than kinship (Cohen 2013). Other authors also describe communities as a place that precipitates shared sentiments and expectations, and generates strong feelings of community attachment (Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2010). Anderson and Gaddefors (2016) also suggest that communities may act as centres of meanings, and for an individual to belong to a community requires sharing of some of these meanings and practices.

CoP emphasizes the relationships between what we do, who we are and the extent to which we perceive ourselves to belong, thus underscoring the dynamic nature of identity that is constructed and reconstructed through ongoing negotiation in social systems (Wenger and Snyder 2000). In

earlier stages of the evolution of CoP theory, learning was presented as a process of becoming a form of trajectory into a particular community (Lave and Wenger 1991). More recent developments stress the requirement for ongoing identity adaptation, with increasing onus placed on the individual to negotiate their identification with multiple, interconnected and overlapping constellations of communities that make up more complex, contemporary landscapes of practice (Wenger 2009; Omidvar and Kislov 2014). Despite the early efforts of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, 95), who argued that 'gender is produced (and often reproduced) in differential memberships in communities of practice', to date, gender has rarely been discussed in relation to CoPs. Individuals produce themselves as 'gendered' subjects by habitually engaging in those social practices of a community – i.e. in different CoPs – that are practically and/or symbolically associated with that community's notions of masculinity or femininity (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). Just as women or men will become involved in 'gendered' CoPs, they will also experience identity-related communal practices differently.

Online communities and identity adaptation

There is an increasing body of research suggesting that online communities may support processes of identity negotiation and adaptation that are ongoing in liminal periods and also provide extensive opportunities for social learning that is central to successful communities of practice (Phillips and Broderick 2014; Warren 2004). The online environment may also reduce geographical and temporal constraints and enhance some of the relational aspects of identity adaptation, for example, by increasing perceived similarity of interaction partners (Walther 1993, 1996). As discussed above, identity management requires that individuals draw on a range of communicative resources (Goffman 1976) to anticipate the impact an identity performance will have on the intended audience and strive to engage in behaviours that align with the meanings associated with a particular identity norm (Fiske 1989; Keltner 1995) in a particular social context.

A propensity for anonymous interaction online might be expected to reduce social inhibition potentially facilitating self-disclosure (and/or more candid feedback on the identity performances of others). More control over time and pace of interactions, the ease of identifying similar others, and more control over the content of social exchanges might also be expected to facilitate selective (or strategic) self-presentation (Bareket-Bojmel, Moran, and Shahar 2016). Alternatively, the anonymity afforded in many online environments may make it easier (for those who wish) to express the 'real me', an alternative internal conception of self not usually expressed in social life (Bargh and McKenna 2004) contributing to feelings of authenticity. As Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) argue, successful self-narratives are those that are both internally and externally validated and more likely to be retained. Hennekam (2016) showed how expectant working mothers engage in trial and error identity experimentation in order to arrive at a version of the self-narrative that balances the desire for social acceptance with the need for authenticity – a process found to be facilitated by the availability of reliable and realistic role models.

We must also consider social media effects on the socio-psychological *processes* of identity adaptation, not least the extent to which digital traces of lived experiences may enhance their accessibility – to both ourselves and others. When experiences are selected and articulated for sharing online, 'they tell the user your activity is this/"These actions are yours and they have meaning"' (Baldauf, Develotte, and Ollagnier-Beldame 2017, 29). Moreover, in the context of online communities, recounting experiences invites a response, whether that is confirmation, correction or denial. Battarbee and Koskinen (2005) introduce the concept of co-experience that emphasizes the social dimension of individual experience online. The authors go on to describe how subconscious experience migrates to become 'an experience' when events are lifted up from the stream of events in everyday life and are evaluated as meaningful enough to be told to others. Interaction partners may reciprocate experiences by empathizing or sharing similar stories of their own (Licoppe and Heurtin 2001; Battarbee and Koskinen 2005); thus, the experience (and the

teller) is validated as meaningful. Alternatively, experiences brought to the attention of others may be rejected or ignored by others if it is uninteresting or even offensive although attempts may be made to soften the blow, for example, through humour or teasing or by changing the subject.

On an ongoing basis, by participating in online community discussions and sharing experiences, individuals may 'test-run' provisional identities by making identity claims, observing and eliciting feedback and interpretations and reshaping how they see themselves and how they imagine others perceive them (Weber and Mitchell 2008). There are clear parallels between the negotiation of meaning associated with communal and collaborative *practice* (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016) discussed above and the negotiated experiences of self that underpin *identity* adaptation that seem particularly pertinent to entrepreneuring mothers. There is synergy here also with the conceptualization of the self as an ongoing reflexive project proposed by Giddens (1991, 54), for whom, 'a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going'.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology whereby we deliberately sought to give 'voice' to women's lived experiences (Hill, Leitch, and Harrison 2006). Our research design included three stages (datasets are detailed in Table 1). *Stage 1: Community orientation* involved non-participant online observation of business-related mumsnet.com discussion fora over an initial period of three weeks and participant observation at the real-world Mumsnet Workfest event held in London on 14 May 2016. In *Stage 2: Follow-up interviews*, researchers conducted thematic analysis of transcripts from semi-structured phone and Skype interviews with participants recruited at Workfest. *Stage 3: Online discussion thread analysis* involved a more systematic sampling approach and deep analysis of mumsnet.com discussion threads based on keyword search terms appearing in thread titles. In this stage, elements of netnography (Kozinets 2002, 2019) were adopted to examine patterns of community engagement in more depth. Such an approach is appropriate for the collection and analysis of data pertaining to social processes as it enables insights into critical sociocultural patterns (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994), particularly around those shards of knowledge and experiences, shared by members of a community, that have an influence on entrepreneurial practice and processes that underpin identity adaptation.

Empirical setting

The empirical setting for this research was Mumsnet.com; the UK's largest online network for parents, which attracts 9.4 million unique visitors per month (Mumsnet 2017). Online, Mumsnet's Talk fora include thematic discussion boards focused on work and business start-ups. Mumsnet also organizes real-world educational and networking events, including Workfest, a popular event, held for two years running in London and advertised as offering 'advice and inspiration for women in – or returning to – the workplace' (About Us – Mumsnet 2017). Whilst there are many other women in business research contexts that might have been selected, we argue that the mumsnet.com context might mitigate pressure to suppress the mother role identity whilst talking 'business'. Our preliminary observations confirmed that mumsnet.com (in comparison to traditional masculinized business contexts) presents relatively low barriers to entry for mothers' embarking on an entrepreneurial path, providing a relatively safe space in which to openly share lived experiences of combining motherhood and business ownership thus providing a valuable novel context in which to examine how women collectively interpret and negotiate the challenges of pursuing entrepreneurship and parenthood. The opportunity to examine patterns of engagement across both on and offline platforms within the context of the same community host was also a significant factor in the selection of mumsnet.com as our empirical setting.

Table 1. Stages of research design.

Stage 1: Community orientation			
Non-participant online observation	January–May 17	Observation sheets and research ‘field’ notes Focal threads downloaded	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who wants to be an entrepreneur? Start here ... (and those who are, help here please!?)</i> (410 Posts) • <i>How might I earn £1000 a month working from home?</i> (421 Posts) • <i>entrepreneur buddies?</i> (27 Posts) 	
Participant observation at Workfest event	14 May 2017	Audio recording, scratch notes, full field notes, keynote presentation vignette	
Stage 2: Interviews			
Semi-structured interviews	May–November 2016	6 interviews between 60 and 90 minutes long Audio recordings and verbatim transcripts	
Stage 3: Mumsnet.com discussion thread analysis			
Sample 1: Keywords in thread titles	Entrepreneur Mumpreneur Start-up	20 threads reviewed 7 downloaded 13 threads reviewed and 5 downloaded 187 threads reviews and 72 downloaded *total downloaded data (text only) 1.06 megabytes	
Sample 2: Keywords occurring anywhere in member posts in relevant topics	Topic Start-ups AIBU *(Am I being unreasonable) Back to work	Keywords Entrepreneur Entrepreneur Start-up	Threads 31 500 269

Data collection

Each stage of our research design provided insights that informed the design of subsequent steps (see Table 1).

Stage 1 provided a preliminary assessment of the potential of mumsnet.com to enable a community of practice. As per ethical guidelines, we introduced ourselves to mumsnet.com administrators via email with a brief explanation of the project and its research aims and were granted authorization to post information about our project online, observe online discussions and attend Workfest and recruit interview participants at the event. This approach allowed data to be collected efficiently and unobtrusively. Two members of the research team were members of mumsnet.com (and thus familiar with general community norms, abbreviations and protocols) but had not previously engaged in business-related discussions. Preliminary online observations focused on discussion threads that provided insights pertaining to each of the three defining characteristics of a CoP, namely the *Domain* (the learning needs that members have in common), the *Community* (how this is perceived by members and the extent to which collective learning bonds members over time) and *Practice* (how interactions might produce a repertoire of shared resources pertaining to entrepreneurship). During this process, we identified important, oft-signposted and therefore highly discoverable ‘seminal’ threads that were downloaded for coding.

Through participant observations at the Workfest event, we drew further insights into how mothers experienced a sense of community and the role of mumsnet.com in enabling a CoP. Workfest was a pivotal event that had drawn us to mumsnet.com community members who gathered to discuss and seek employment and entrepreneurship options to investigate their career options beyond motherhood, and we had wondered if what type of entrepreneurship was on offer for the participants. By the end of the event, we were convinced that the conceptions of entrepreneurship conveyed to participants were typical of the enterprise discourse and support offered in the UK. What was striking, in hindsight, about our participation in the event was that we observed the relationality and connection with the participants, and our intuition brought to the surface the questions relating to the role of this community in motivating entrepreneurial endeavour.

Table 2. Interviewees' demographic information.

Code	Age group	Owner/founder	Industry	No. of employees	No of children
IV1	45–54	Founder	Manufacturing and retail of luxury goods	2 p/t and 3 interns	2 (4 years and 6 years)
IV2	35–44	Founder	Online retail	1 f/t and 3 p/t	2 (3 years and 4 years)
IV3	45–54	Co-founder	Digital education services	3 co-founders and 2 interns	2 (5 years and 8 years)
IV4	35–44	Founder	Online teaching solutions	0	1 (2 years)
IV5	35–44	Founder	Business planning support	0	0
IV6	55–64	Founder	Psychological support services	0	3 (23 years and 36 years)

Scratch notes obtained during the event were then developed into full field notes in June and July 2016 (Bryman and Bell 2015) with the help of the audio recordings of all panel discussions. In order to agree on key themes and provide independent scrutiny of the interpretation of the data, discussions took place among the research team both during and after the event, and during the development of full field notes and a keynote presentation vignette.

Insights from Stage 1 informed the development of the interview schedule employed in Stage 2 designed to probe mothers' experiences of entrepreneurship and parenthood and use of and attitudes towards mumsnet.com. Interviews were conducted over Skype and by phone after the event at a time convenient for the participants. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Two members of the research team were present for each interview. A purposive sample size of six, though small, was deemed appropriate, given that our aim was not to generalize findings from a representative sample or reach saturation from our content analysis, but instead to extend and contextualize findings from Stage 1 observations. There were both Workfest event contributors (including a business host who hosted a workshop on business planning but is not herself a mother) and delegates in the sample. See Table 2 for profiles of interviewees.

Finally, selected insights from analysis of interview transcripts informed a further stage of more systematic sampling and analysis of discussion threads, which represents our main dataset that revealed deeper insights into patterns of interaction within the online community engaged in entrepreneurship. In the first instance, we identified threads featuring keywords *entrepreneur*, *mumpreneur* and *start-up in the title* as these are most likely to be discovered by newcomers to the site using the main search bar functionality. Second, we used the advanced search functionality within the Talk section of the site to identify member posts occurring anywhere in a discussion thread featuring keywords *entrepreneur* or *start-up* occurring in the most relevant topic categories. These data sets were rendered more manageable by prioritizing the most recent active threads, but by this point, we were already close to the point of saturation. Many of the new threads identified included passing references to 'entrepreneur' and so were discarded. Key themes were then discussed and agreed upon, and a purposive sample of focal threads was downloaded, printed, and coded by three researchers. The similarities and differences in interpretation were discussed and resolved and codes revised. The data collection and analysis continued until new threads disclosed no significant new features, thereby signalling theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Data analysis

In analysing our rich data set, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) protocol for thematic data analysis. The research team began by compiling all the textual data including online archival data, interview transcriptions, and field notes documenting events, conversations, and observations. This process resulted in the generation of a comprehensive database that facilitated the subsequent analysis framework to be implemented. In the first stage of the data analysis, the research team

members re-familiarized themselves with the data by iteratively reading the transcripts and field notes. In the second stage, the open coding of the data was performed to enable the identification of codes, which were then clustered together to form categories.

The third stage led to the development of emergent themes that highlighted preliminary connections between the data. The fourth stage was characterized by a consistent comparison analysis in which data fragments were compared for similarities and differences (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In the fifth stage of analysis, the three themes of *building*, *being* and *belonging* emerged as relevant to our research aim.

Our analysis of three data sets that were centred on the role of Mumsnet as a mother's community hub enabled us to explore, in particular, how online communities might enable women to collectively interpret and negotiate the challenges they encounter when combining parenthood and business development. Our Workfest participant observations provided validation of the locus of enquiry at the community level; revealing strong evidence of the affinity and camaraderie that existed between the entrepreneuring mothers and of their appreciation of a community context in which their mother role-identities need not be hidden. The follow-up interviews provided in-depth insights into the mothers' experiences of combining entrepreneurship and parenthood and the impact of the latter on work-related attitudes and underscored the benefits of community engagement with respect to developing entrepreneurial competencies. In the final stage of the analysis, which was informed and shaped by the earlier ones, we performed extensive analysis of online discussion threads using Braun and Clarke (2006) stages of qualitative data and distinguished specific community practices and patterns of interaction of entrepreneuring mothers enabled by Mumsnet that supported their identity transformation, revealing how the characteristics of the medium influence specific community practices.

Findings

Our findings are summarized in [Figure 1](#), which illustrates the first-order concepts, second-order themes and the emergent aggregate dimensions of *building*, *being* and *belonging*.

Whilst these headings have emerged from our data, the work on these dimensions already exists in the literature on entrepreneurship (Wade, Smith, and Anderson 2003), who in their original philosophical study of the practice of entrepreneurship identified the ontological process of *becoming*, *being* and *belonging*. Indeed, prior authors have coined these terms in relation to entrepreneurship. For instance, Bygrave and Bygrave (1989, 21) posited that entrepreneurship is 'a process of becoming rather than a state of being, evolving over time'; and for Chia (1996) it is one of 'becoming' and 'being'. Another eminent scholar in the field, Gartner (1988, 12) argued that entrepreneurship entails a 'state of being' and this is one of the main reasons for a narrow focus on individual qualities not creation in the study of entrepreneurship. Furthermore, Hjorth (2001, 83) also presented the ontological process of becoming and pointed out the importance of investigating how a concept becomes. Consequentially, Hjorth (2001, 99/258) refers to the 'having become' of things and to 'becoming other'. All these elements aptly describe the entrepreneurial process. This offers a theoretical foundation to our empirical findings on how mothers who engage in entrepreneurship transition through becoming entrepreneurial, to being an entrepreneur and belonging to the entrepreneurial community. However, in our case, the data reveal a different sequence to the emergence of a mother who becomes an entrepreneur by firstly building the social learning through community to belonging to the entrepreneurial community to becoming an entrepreneur. For the purposes of efficient presentation of findings, first-order concepts are expressed in abbreviated terms, whilst remaining true to the informants' experience of the phenomenon (Gehman et al. 2018). A further table of illustrative direct quotes from online discussion threads may be found in the Appendix.

By contrast, second-order themes and the aggregate dimensions that emerged from them are informed by our understanding of the literature and, in particular, communities of practice as the principal analytical frame. The *Building* dimension aligns with the social learning focus of

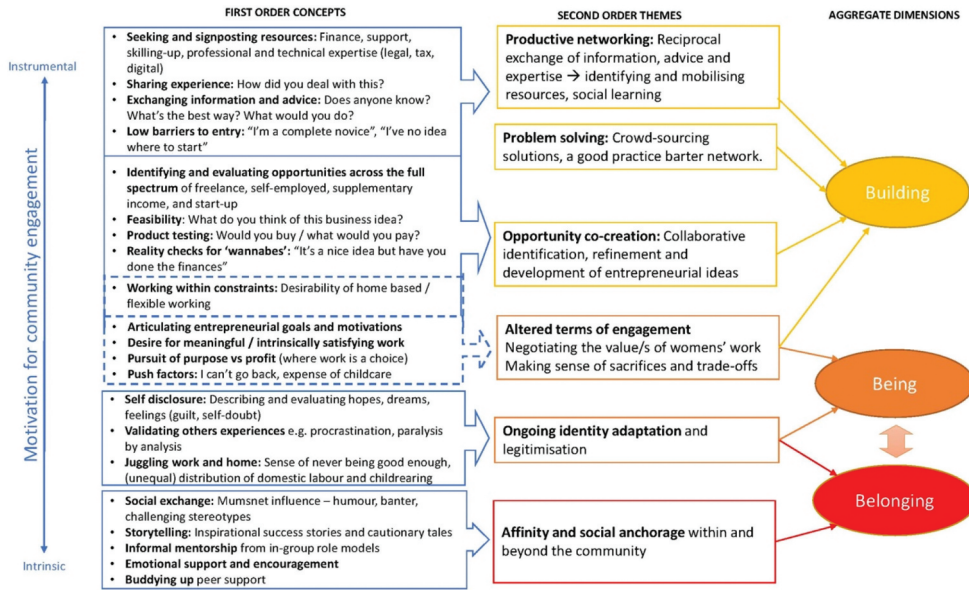


Figure 1. Data structure – women's engagement with online networks through *building*, *being* and *belonging*.

CoPs – the exchange of tacit knowledge, development of shared resources and practical problem solving. The *Belonging* dimension aligns with the importance of affiliation and social exchange within a relational network that CoP theory makes explicit. The *Being* dimension focusses on the importance of identity; *becoming* an entrepreneur whilst simultaneously being a (good) mother. In the analysis below, we attempt to present evidence that both distinguishes key dimensions of community engagement but also highlight the extent to which these dimensions overlap – as anticipated in the context of a CoP in which personal and professional development opportunities are embedded within communal action, discussion and social exchange. Selected extracts and analytical commentary highlight the linkages between multiple themes embedded in discussion threads. Where data and insights from each of the three phases of collection are combined below; we use the codes [WF] Workfest [IV] interviews and [ON] online discussion for to identify the source if not explicitly stated.

Building

Strong evidence from both interviews and online observation supports our conjecture that entrepreunering mothers derive significant utilitarian value from engaging with members of the mumsnet.com community in business-themed online discussions and events. Discussion fora search functionality, mumsnet's diverse membership and high levels of traffic and participation in mumsnet TALK fora enabled very efficient exchange of tacit knowledge, development of shared tools and resources and practical problem solving [IV, ON, WF]. One thread entitled *Who wants to be an entrepreneur?* generated more than 410 posts while 'active' between August 2016 and January 2017. It remains among the top five results for the keyword search 'entrepreneur' at the time of writing, underscoring the durability of content and its potential value to future 'lurkers' on the site long after the original conversation has petered out [ON].

We observed how women drew upon both their everyday parental and previous employment experiences as a source of new business ideas and readily collaborated to refine and develop ideas presented by members for feedback [ON and WF].

Ranging from ‘crowdsourcing’ brand names to identifying partners or suppliers, to dealing with customers who are reluctant to pay, the nature of the challenges shared and problems discussed within the online fora varied. In particular, financial, technical, marketing and legal advice is commonly sought and offered, often from highly experienced individuals even in niche specialisms, in effect creating a best-practice barter network. As one interviewee (*IV1 Workfest panellist and business owner – luxury goods manufacturing*) explained, ‘One of the big adjustments to start-up [from a previous position in a large organization] [is that] you can still call in so many favors, but you can’t [afford to] pay for what I am used to pulling in other people [to do], and you realize that you need to skill up yourself. I learn a lot from other women in my networks. They are very clever in finding ways to skill up’.

Mumsnet does not allow self-promotion on public fora. Interviewees confirmed, however, that engagement in discussion fora helps with reputation building and lead generation, with free advice from knowledgeable experts prompting members to investigate member profiles and follow up with direct messaging functionality provided by Mumsnet.

As per Mumsnet’s norms, responses to advice requests from aspirant or early-stage entrepreneurs are largely supportive, but examples of ‘tough love’ are also abundant. Me-too ideas such as personalized baby vests or business plans that ‘do not stack up’ financially attract criticism [ON]. The community also effectively ‘outs’ any homeworking scams and pyramid schemes in the interests of its members.

The accessibility and availability of online networks may be particularly valuable during the early stages of venture development; barriers to entry are low, advice is free, and users may readily access information and resources on a wide range of topics. One interviewee

IV3 (Workfest Speaker and Digital Entrepreneur) had been signposted to a variety of online and offline sources including Mumsnet’s chat fora, which she described as a ‘first point of call when I need to know something, or to look something up business related, rather than ask people’.

While the exchanges between aspiring peers are typically encouraging and supportive, veterans are most likely to provide a ‘reality check’ as the below example demonstrates.

Extracts from ***Has anyone started their own business and NOT made any money?*** (46 Posts)

Am just starting out as self-employed. Have signed off JSA and am absolutely terrified that it will all go tits up. I won’t make a penny (online shop) and will end up not being able to support me and the DCs. Am I overthinking it all and the majority of new businesses succeed eventually? (Quoteinabizzlefam Fri 20 May 2016 22:38:53)

My experience is that many women have zero confidence about employability after being an sahm. I think you’ve shown huge resourcefulness already . . . making a full living from scratch from a home business is really tough. Hope it works out in your case. (allannandale Sat 21 May 2016 20:49:30)

Yes you will be able to claim Working Family Tax Credit . . . I have been doing that for five years, declaring earnings of five to six thousand. (MariaSklodowska Sat 21 May 2016 20:58:43)

Oh dear. Why did you sign off JSA [Job Seekers Allowance – an unemployment benefit]? I work with start-ups fairly often. Rule of thumb: 3-5 years before you make a living out of it. If you make minimum wage equivalent after a year, after taxes of course, then you are doing really well (do you know how to do your business taxes?) I hear lots of business cases built around the fact that the person really needs this to work because they need the money and/or they need it for their self-esteem. Sadly, that’s not how it works. (RunRabbitRunRabbit, Sat 21 May 2016 22:02:44)

The OP (original poster) above feels sufficiently comfortable in the context of mumsnet to disclose her personal circumstances (single parent), precarious financial situation and feelings of self-doubt. Frequent use of mumsnet.com abbreviations (DC = darling children, SAHM = stay at home mum) suggest she feels a sense of affinity with the community. In response, practical advice, e.g. for maintaining an income stream whilst establishing the business and information on specific sources of financial support, is often interspersed with messages of encouragement and support. The OP’s authentically shared experiences prompt peers to reciprocate with their own stories that in turn serve to validate the OP’s decision to pursue an entrepreneurial path and

legitimize feelings of self-doubt following a period away from work. Professional contributors identify themselves, 'I work with start-up's fairly often' and emphasize the importance of proper research and planning – often implicitly or explicitly opening the door, should the OP wish, to make contact via direct message.

Being

Our findings underscore the extent to which becoming a parent impacts work-related experiences, attitudes, and aspirations that prompt many individuals to make significant work-related changes [WF, IVs and ON]. For some, becoming a parent (or being a good parent) was incompatible with their previous careers, creating a push towards entrepreneurship as an alternative source of income, with many valuing the opportunity to work more flexible – although not necessarily fewer – hours [IV, ON]. While mothers may perceive business ownership as providing a more favourable work–life balance, there is far more evidence to the contrary in the reported experiences of the majority of active entrepreneurs participating in the online discussion fora, who, to get their businesses off the ground, typically report working longer and more unsociable hours for little financial reward. Entrepreneurial narratives reveal the complexity of mothers' internal 'cost-benefit' analyses [IV and ON]. The answer to the question *Is it 'worth it' to return to work?* appears dependent upon highly individualized circumstances and associated identity projects [WF and ON].

Several interviewees and online discussion participants described how pregnancy and motherhood had created a desire to pursue more challenging, meaningful and personal goals through work, in effect raising the threshold of the intrinsic reward sought from work, especially when it requires time away from family. For others, who reported feelings of dissatisfaction before childbirth, becoming a parent had been a catalyst to pursue a path they had always considered [IV]. Strong evidence emerged from both the interviews and online discussions that attempts at 'juggling' responsibilities across multiple, and often incompatible, domains created considerable identity dissonance. Example thread titles include, '*Anyone in startup and a SAHM [stay at home mum]*', '*Entrepreneur Mums – How do you juggle it all? Help!*' and '*Are three kids too much if you run your own business?*'.

The tensions between attachment parenting ideals and the importance of individual self-fulfilment could be detected particularly among middle-class women, for whom work was a choice, as they attempted to articulate a coherent self-narrative, as the below extracts demonstrate [evidence from IV and ON]. This may be interpreted as a genuine shift in priorities or, alternatively, as a desire to justify time away from home and family in terms of a purpose beyond profit – e.g. businesses that support women or children, employ staff on school hours or set a good example to children.

IV4 (educational services) "I want to be a role model for my daughter; a good one! I want to be able to show her what I can do, and how much I can do, and that it's ok to make mistakes, but you sort of keep going".

Pursuing an entrepreneurial career may therefore provide a self-synthesizing solution (to the extent that it is more readily *internally* validated as authentic) even if, in practice, the desired work–life balance is not forthcoming. The following is an extract from a lively discussion between a number of women working in (and seeking to leave) the legal profession in which tensions between personal and social expectations of being a good mother, 'I just want to be with my daughter' and changing priorities are evident, 'I am wasting my life with it' [a legal career that presumably took years of study and some commitment to achieve]

I'm on a career break at the moment but I really don't want to return. It's bad for my confidence and stress levels and I feel like I'm wasting my life with it. It's not that I want to do something mega fulfilling (though that would be wonderful), just something that didn't deaden me. Been thinking about getting a baby product manufactured, but actually I just want to be with my daughter so am considering setting up as a child-minder with an Eco/Montessori twist. (dontrythisathome, Thu 8 September 2011 22:39:06)

The extent to which start-up stories are often interwoven with highly personal and poignant narratives of self-growth was evident in one noteworthy breakout session at Workfest. In the session, entitled *What we did next*, previous attendees were invited to reflect on their achievements one year later (all had pursued an entrepreneurial path). One researcher observed how several audience members and panellists were moved to tears as they shared the highs and lows of their entrepreneurial journeys [WF]. The extent of personal disclosure and the sense of intimacy created in the room may have enabled panellists and audience members to express their feelings and insecurities more freely.

Similarly, interviewees shared the extent to which hearing and comparing their stories and recognizing similarities in the feelings and experiences of others who had gone on to be successful in business had provided inspiration by helping them envisage a future entrepreneurial self, as the following extract shows.

IV6 (Mumsnet delegate and business owner – counselling and skills development) recalled how participation at a previous Workfest event had influenced her decision to start her business, “I was listening to her life story [Baroness Michelle Mone – Workfest speaker in 2015] and all the things that she has been through and ... when she’d finished, I put my hand up ... because one of the things for me was that I just felt it was too late to go into business, being in my fifties was just too old. I was scared and did not feel the confidence. So I found that courage and said to her, ‘Next year, when I come back, I will have my own business up and running’. I’ve always taught my children, my girls, that there is no such word as ‘can’t’ ... can’t means shan’t and won’t! But I never took this advice for myself. I got there [Workfest] and realized that I could, and I can! It took me a long time to realize this!”

We observed similar exchanges online, with Mumsnet’s discussion threads appearing to provide a safe space for mothers to reflect on and articulate their experiences to share (and compare) with the community.

Extracts from ***Entrepreneur Mums – how do you juggle it all? Help!!*** (9 Posts)

Is it possible to run your own biz with kids and a family to look after? My day NEVER ends! We moved back to London so I had to leave my previous job which I always thought was such hard work and I am now starting my own business. Aack! 12- 15 hour days! It’s fun and learning lots but it’s NUTS!! I feel like I never get to spend time with my kids. Has anyone gone this route? Will I ever get my life back?

You have to view your business as another child. You have to nurture it, love it and discipline it too. With the right mix it will grow into a successful individual. Personally I find a lot of the commonly used techniques for rearing children very useful in running a business particularly managing staff. Set your rules and be very clear about them, be consistent. 5 years down the line I am just beginning to reap the benefits of my business.

As the extracts above demonstrate, by selecting events to re-tell and share as an ‘experience’, members effectively lift these thoughts, feelings and actions up from the everyday. Thus, mothers’ entrepreneurial experiences are collectively maintained, supported and elaborated within the community, acquiring meaning through social exchange. Through this process, participants’ self-presentations as entrepreneurs and mothers are offered up for feedback providing fuel for ongoing identity adaptation and internal self-validation. These findings are consistent with conceptualization of CoPs as providing opportunities for participants to develop both personally and professionally (Lave and Wenger 1991).

It is important to note one distinctive interviewee who by contrast revealed a strong desire to distance herself from what she perceived to be negative associations of female entrepreneurship and the Mumsnet context. For her, Mumsnet.com was simply a means to an end, a networking platform she used versus a community with which she identified. This entrepreneur readily referred to other entrepreneuring women who she considered to be *just playing at business* and considered the mumpreneurship label ‘horrific’. In her responses, she continuously emphasized the respect and seniority she had enjoyed (and the resources she had at her disposal) in her previous business career, suggesting that maternal role identity is not always more self-salient for women pursuing an entrepreneurial path post childbirth.

Belonging

Mumsnet's Workfest provided a strong indication of the sense of affinity that exists among entrepreneuring mothers. Despite most delegates attending alone, the informal and welcoming atmosphere made every break in the schedule an opportunity to chat to the person in the next chair. The researchers observed and participated in many such micro-exchanges during which, within minutes, the participants had exchanged life stories and career aspirations and had discussed the challenges associated with 'juggling' work and family. The convivial atmosphere of the event and its association with the Mumsnet online community seemed to mitigate any pressure the participants may have felt to hide or disguise their mother role-identities, providing a relatively 'safe space' in which their voices could be heard, their experiences legitimized, and their concerns and insecurities expressed without fear of judgement. Statements such as 'muddling through is an underrated skill', 'no one is exempt from working mother guilt', and 'you are only ever as happy as your unhappiest child' stood out from the preliminary panel discussion. A successful media executive had shared her experience of missing her son's first Harvest Festival concert due to an important business meeting – something she had been unable to forget despite having no recollection at all of the meeting itself. The panellists agreed unanimously that talking about these feelings helped relieve the guilt because, 'knowing that it's not just you that feels this way is important'.

Supporting evidence that entrepreneuring mothers experience a sense of affinity through community engagement emerged from the follow-up interviews. For example, **IV5** explained how she had set up a successful Facebook community for her clients, while another former blogger turned online retailer had developed an extensive online network from which she derived both practical and emotional support.

It just means so much when somebody extends their hand to say, I found it hard too. It's not [just] about saying I hope you are ok ... We have a group of twelve of us [fellow entrepreneurs], and we are helping each other whenever we can; from moral support, to sitting down and listening, and sharing ... [We help each other] working out how we exist, and how we grow and we are all in the same boat. (IV2 Workfest speaker: Online Retailer)

Similarly, the online exchanges were also characterized by spontaneity, openness, generosity, and reciprocity, which seemed to help sustain a sense of belonging and commitment to the community. One post, entitled *AIBU*¹ [Am I Being Unreasonable] *to be upset by a friend's reaction to my business idea?* exemplified the nature of the emotional support offered to members by virtual strangers connected by shared experiences. In the original post, one member had expressed her disappointment after a 'professionally successful' friend had made disparaging comments. Twenty-nine replies had been posted within 10 hours, many offering support through shared experiences and feelings. Some responses from those with direct experience of running their own businesses had also emphasized the importance of developing resilience.

Hard to say. It could be a case of her being the 'successful' one in your friendship and you might be upsetting the balance ... but yeah, you need to toughen up a bit. I'm sure you'll hear worse if you do start up. I started my own business late last year from home, now looking to move into commercial premises and it's amazing how many people you'd think would be supportive offer a negative opinion (thanks mum!). I just smile sweetly, tell them my business plan stacks up, and cut the conversation there. (CleanLinesSharpEdges Tue 13 January 2015 12:46:54)

Other posts implicitly and explicitly (as below) revealed the extent to which the mumsnet context supported more honest and open self-disclosure as aspects of the mother role identity did not need to be 'hidden' as they might be in traditional business contexts.

Wow, thanks, loads of info and ideas ... Will have a look at them amidst nit-combing ... Grr. The kind of thing I definitely cannot mention on a 'proper' business forum! (breadandbutterfly Sun 12 June 2011 12:58:15)

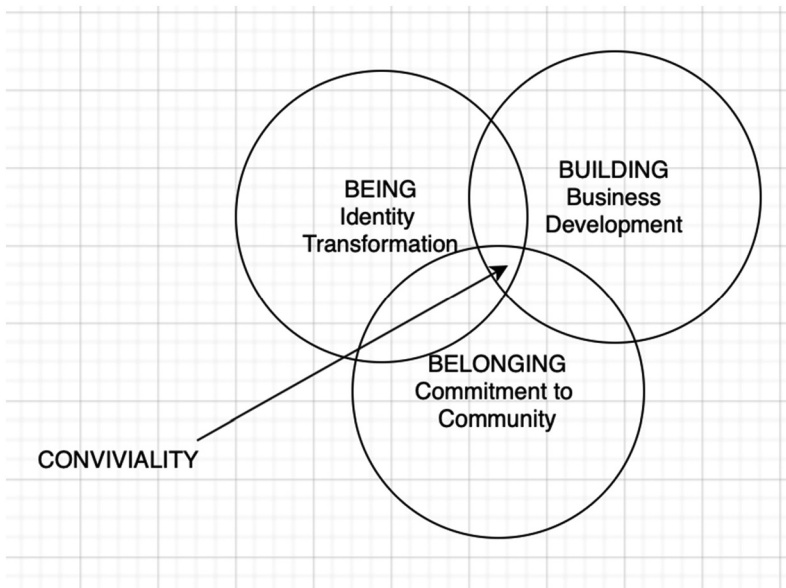


Figure 2. Three circle model of the communal practices of entrepreneuring mothers.

Discussion

In following the social perspective on entrepreneurship (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2012) and viewing entrepreneurship as a community-based phenomenon (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016), in this study we set out to understand how entrepreneuring mothers create and maintain community connections that may facilitate development of entrepreneurial competencies, support identity adaptation and potentially reconcile role tension using on and offline engagement platforms hosted by Mumsnet.com. Figure 2 illustrates our conceptual framework, in which the ontologically derived process of entrepreneuring: *building*, *being* and *belonging* are depicted as interrelated and overlapping dimensions of community engagement that enable women to develop a repertoire of shared tools and resources to enhance entrepreneurial practice by sharing their lived experiences of combining parenthood and business ownership, i.e. relational practices.

Mumsnet's business-themed talk topics provide a rich, yet readily accessible source of information and advice for women entrepreneurs, especially relevant for early-stage business development (*building*). Increasingly, as advice is sought and offered and interwoven with more personal stories and aspirations, a sense of affinity and consciousness of kind develops that underpins an ongoing commitment to the community (*belonging*). This, in turn, creates reciprocal trust and conditions conducive to authentic self-disclosure, providing a space in which a synthesizing self-narrative may be collectively and discursively developed (*being*), potentially enhancing mothers' perceptions of entrepreneurial self-efficacy through exposure to relatable online others successfully pursuing an entrepreneurial path (Austin and Nauta 2016; Rocha and Van Praag 2020). We observed how mothers felt more confident discussing business aspirations with fellow mothers in a familiar context characterized by shared and well-understood norms and etiquette, showcasing the communal nature of entrepreneurship emergence (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016). By contrast, a perceived lack-of fit in traditional business networking contexts presents a barrier to entry, especially for early-stage or aspiring entrepreneurs (Ozkazanc-Pan 2014; Ozkazanc-Pan and Muntean 2018; Harrison, Leitch, and McAdam 2020). Mumsnet foregrounds the mother role-identity by default, facilitating self-disclosure and contributing to its participants' sense of a consciousness of kind, reciprocal trust and a 'safe space' in which to share experiences.

We propose that Mumsnet, as host, enables a community of practice of entrepreneuring mothers that is distinguished by connections distributed across both on and offline contexts. Whilst the form and function of the CoP *are* shaped by the key characteristics of the host and the particular engagement platform (discussed below), it is not constrained by the boundaries of a single web domain nor does depend on a single technological ‘solution’. Interviews with entrepreneuring mothers revealed how spin-offs or sub-groups continually form and disperse or migrate from one platform to another in order to better serve specific needs. While this results in a notion of cohort that is more ephemeral than that initially proposed by Wenger (2009), the mothers in our study nevertheless share common learning needs and experience a strong sense of belonging and commitment to the community even if they only contributed to online discussions sporadically. Of course, all networks may provide useful contacts and support the development of social capital (Anderson, Park, and Jack 2007; Jack, Dodd, and Anderson 2008; McKeever, Anderson, and Jack 2014), but this does not necessarily make them CoPs. In a traditional business network, participation is predicated on the utility of contacts and the expectation of reciprocal exchange of value (Jack, Dodd, and Anderson 2008). By contrast, members of a CoPs engage in co-creation of shared resources presenting opportunities both for professional development and personal growth.

Our analysis shows how the community connections (Jack, Dodd, and Anderson 2008) established by entrepreneuring mothers both fulfils and exceeds the functional requirements of a CoP proposed by Wenger (2009). Mumsnet.com hosted interactions enable the development of an extensive shared repertoire of resources and tools that may be drawn upon to enhance entrepreneurial practice and facilitate member perceptions of belonging and legitimacy (De Clercq and Voronov 2009; Anderson and Gaddefors 2016) – that is a particular challenge for entrepreneuring mothers. In more recent developments of CoP theory, there is greater emphasis on how identity is formed across practices and not just within practices (Omidvar and Kislov 2014). Our analysis reveals how participation in a diverse and distributed CoP supports development of individuals’ *knowledgeability* or capacity to know something about a wide range of practices without necessarily being able to claim competence in a specific niche. Through our analysis of this particular CoP of entrepreneuring mothers, we have shown how individuals benefit from a wide range of practical resources and emotional support to rapidly upskill, pivot, plug gaps in knowledge and identify collaborative partners to support them in their pursuit of entrepreneurial goals. We thus contribute to understanding of how individuals modulate their relationships with complex and overlapping *landscapes of practice* that characterize the field of entrepreneurship in general but are further complicated for individuals positioned as contradictory to the ‘natural order’ (De Beauvoir 1949; Butler 1990; Anderson and Warren 2011; Ozkazanc-Pan 2014; Ozkazanc-Pan and Muntean 2018; Stead 2017).

In relation to the ongoing identity adaptation of entrepreneuring mothers, a strong sense of affinity and reciprocal trust, enhanced by the context of a ‘safe space in which to share’, underpins continued commitment to this particular CoP and facilitates ongoing identity adaptation. We observed evidence of shared purpose amongst entrepreneuring mothers, despite the pursuit of highly individualized business goals and diverse personal circumstances. Indeed, Anderson and Gaddefors (2016) proposed that communities can be the centres of shared meanings, and the community participants need to learn and share some of these meanings and practices in order to achieve belonging to this community. In articulating and sharing their entrepreneurial experiences, women in effect co-create a discursive repertoire that fuels the shared identity work of this specific entrepreneurial community. Importantly, we observed how interactions in on and offline engagement platforms are replete with gender role-identity cues, with the mother role identity central to members’ self-presentations. We thus argue that members are better equipped to ameliorate role tension in such focused communities, whilst in contrast, gender role-identities are often suppressed in more traditional business networking contexts due to pervasive masculinized entrepreneurial ideals.

Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar (2008) argue that narrating plays an important role in the sensemaking process, particularly during challenging life transitions. We propose that mumsnet.com serves as a co-experience platform that facilitates self-narrative experimentation and development. As women reflect on and hold up selected experience to share with others, they are able to validate diverse experiences of juggling entrepreneurship and motherhood (being an entrepreneur) supporting the development of the self-belief and psychological resilience required to start up and succeed on an entrepreneurial career path. Entrepreneurial mothers experience identity dissonance as they attempt to reconcile role performances in the often-incompatible domains of business ownership and parenthood. Given the stark differences between the conventional context or 'stage' on which business and domestic life is performed, identity gaps are exaggerated and inevitable (Jung and Hecht 2004; Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau 2003). Performance continuity becomes an issue whenever home and work collide – a constant challenge for home-based enterprises. Tensions may emerge in as the demands of a growing business necessitate the reallocation of domestic responsibilities perpetuating internal narratives of guilt and self-doubt are perpetuated. We propose that participating in a CoP alleviates (even if only temporarily) these perceived identity gaps, thus reducing the cognitive load and emotional strain associated with maintaining a consistent self 'performance' or, as Swail and Marlow (2018) suggested, the guilt women find themselves dealing with for attenuating the feminine and accentuating the masculine. As women reflect on and articulate the actions, thoughts, and feelings they share with others online, they present their experiences in more relatable ways – potentially reflecting back the power of the online 'others' they encounter in a community context (Lopez 2009).

Further, our analysis suggests a number of ways in which key characteristics of the host and the online environment might enhance some of the benefits women seek and derive from engagement in this distinctive CoP. As expected, the use of anonymous mumsnet 'tags' did appear to contribute to a degree of disinhibition online, potentially facilitating self-disclosure and also stimulating some very candid feedback on the shared experiences. The care with which both novice and more experienced contributors communicate their credentials and embed identity cues within their requests and responses is evident; the asynchronous communication context provides far more control over self-performances that in turn might be expected to enhance key processes of identity negotiation through social exchange. The extensive work on computer-mediated communication conducted by Walther (1993, 1996) illuminates some of the positive biases in play that may lead to idealized perceptions of online interaction partners and of their potential influence. When non-verbal communication cues are limited, those that are present (similar work frustrations and home circumstances or shared passions) may assume special significance. In addition, a strong sense of group affiliation (with the Mumsnet community) may enhance self-categorization tendencies and lead to the online others being perceived as more similar and exerting greater influence (Phillips and Broderick 2014). Taken together, this may normalize entrepreneurship for parents, challenge gender stereotypes about what constitutes appropriate work for mothers, and nurture perceptions of entrepreneurial self-efficacy.

Taken together, these largely technological affordances of this specific CoP appear to play a big part in creating a safe space for authentic disclosure and in which readily accessible emotional support and empathy is on offer at any time of day or night. We have shown that Mumsnet's 'nest of vipers' provides support, challenging debate, inspiration, and encouragement but also tough love or a reality check when needed. Among the 'witty banter', a powerful emancipatory discourse emerges around the lightning rod label of 'mumpreneurship', as exemplified by the discussion thread *AIBU* [Am I Being Unreasonable] *to want to stab someone whenever I hear the word mumpreneur*. These discussions challenge the acceptance of gendered divisions of labour (what a woman's work is or should be) and negative judgements of female entrepreneurial endeavours; the implication being that women cannot do 'proper entrepreneurship'. Instead, our findings corroborate the argument

that mothers derive inherent satisfaction from creatively merging work and family (Brush, De Bruin, and Welter 2009; Ekinsmyth 2013) and finding *values-congruent* ways of conducting business (Jennings and Brush 2013).

Conclusion

This article was inspired by the totality of the work of Professor Alistair Anderson, who argued for social perspective on entrepreneurship and developed several seminal works that called for better accommodation of social interactions and appreciation of context in studies of entrepreneurship. This article focused on a specific group of entrepreneurial actors – women, who are also mothers – and their practice of entrepreneuring which they develop by seeking, receiving and giving help via a social networking site- mumsnet.com. In this paper, we show how entrepreneuring mothers create and maintain community connections with important others in an online environment that facilitate the development of entrepreneurial competencies, support identity adaptation and potentially reconcile role tension. Our article examined the characteristics of the community engagements facilitated by Mumsnet and shows how entrepreneuring mothers' community engagement through interaction in the discussion fora responding to specific information seeking, as well as advice and emotional support giving may in fact support the development of a range of entrepreneurial competencies through facilitation of shared lived experiences of combining parenthood and business ownership, and thereby showcasing the relational nature of the entrepreneurial practices that emerge from within the community. Our central theoretical contribution is the three dimensions of entrepreneurial community engagement that underpin this process: *building* (productive networking and information exchange), *belonging* (support and social anchorage) and *being* (identity adaptation and self-narrative co-creation). Whilst in most CoPs, the cohort is united in pursuit of common business goals, mumsnet represents a context, where both business and identity goals are highly individualized, yet nevertheless a sense of *togetherness in adversity* emerges for members as women share their attempts to reconcile their role performances in competing and sometimes incompatible domains of motherhood and entrepreneurship.

We make two theoretical contributions in this article. Our first contribution is to the literature that views entrepreneurship as a practice originating in communities (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016) and its relational and social origins (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2012), as we reveal a novel empirical setting of social media platforms which offers opportunities for women to collectively make sense, interpret and navigate the identity transitions and transformations that also merge the practices of parenthood and entrepreneurship. Our proposed conceptual model of three overlapping domains of community engagement where entrepreneuring emerges: *Building*, *Being* and *Belonging* make identity transformations more explicit, as we were able to observe how women articulate and share their entrepreneurial experiences, and in effect co-create a discursive repertoire to help engage in the shared identity work of this specific entrepreneurial community. As mothers engage in productive networking and make sense of their work and family lives collaboratively with other members of the CoP, women enhance their entrepreneurial competencies whilst building a sense of belonging and entrepreneurial identity. This contribution is an important addition to the stream of works on the social science perspective in entrepreneurship and seeing entrepreneurship as a relational and situational practice (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2012). Our second contribution is to the literature on entrepreneurial identity (Ladge, Clair, and Greenberg 2012; Stryker and Burke 2000; Watson 2009), whereby we underscore the patterns of engagement in an online community that entrepreneuring mothers activate during their ongoing identity adaptation. Specifically, in the article, we showcase the specific characteristics of the community host and of the supporting technology that combine to alleviate possible identity dissonance and help facilitate self-disclosure to seemingly similar others with whom people build relationships online.

Therefore, our research underscores the significance of community at the heart of the entrepreneurial process (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016) and extends our understanding of CoPs incorporating but not being constrained to online platforms. Our study illuminates that women (and men) may reap the benefits of participation in CoPs at all stages of their venture development, but perhaps particularly when their entrepreneurial endeavour is motivated by self-actualization, identity dissonance-reduction or a quest for more intrinsically satisfying, meaningful or value-congruent work. We have identified some of the properties of Mumsnet (solidarity, feminism, mother role identity) and its supporting technology (online disinhibition and potential for hyper-personal communication and perceptions of similarity with others) that create conditions conducive to authentic self-disclosure and may serve to alleviate identity gaps. We have shown how a *productive* network can also be a vital source of social anchorage, support, and empowerment – when women authentically share lived experiences (i.e. emotions, fears, hopes, dreams, and life stories). Further, we have explained how certain characteristics of the online medium may enhance the positive influence of in-group role models encountered online and inoculate against gender stereotypes, thus enhancing members' sense of a 'safe space' in which their diverse experiences of juggling entrepreneurship and motherhood may be validated and legitimacy may be collectively conferred.

This research contributes more broadly to our understanding of alternative modes of entrepreneurial organizing and may offer some explanatory power in other contexts, such as the lifestyle oriented or pro-social enterprises that are also often associated with 'smallness'. As such, future research could explore whether our proposed conceptualization of CoP engagement has explanatory power in other passion-driven, value-based and self-actualizing entrepreneurship contexts, for example, craft and creative businesses, lifestyle entrepreneurship and social enterprise.

Note

1. The popular Mumsnet acronym AIBU [Am I Being Unreasonable] is used by members to compare interpretations of reported experiences and events.

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