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To cite this article: Shani Orgad & Kathryn Claire Higgins (2021): Sensing the (in)visible: domestic cleaning and cleaners on Mumsnet Talk, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2021.1922486](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1922486)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1922486>



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Published online: 10 Jun 2021.



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Sensing the (in)visible: domestic cleaning and cleaners on Mumsnet Talk

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ABSTRACT

Based on a thematic analysis of 7,569 posts on the online parenting forum Mumsnet Talk, in this article we examine how domestic cleaning—one of the most invisible aspects of reproductive labour—and the people who perform it are made visible. We conceptualize Mumsnet discussions as a “visibility sensor:” a technological and affective space that captures, analyses and relays information and feelings in ways that contribute to visibilizing cleaning labour and sensitizing its users to recognize the women they employ to clean their homes. At the same time, our analysis highlights the limitations of this sensor: how the visibility Mumsnet discussions afford to cleaning and cleaners tends to reinscribe its meanings within a gendered and individualized logic. This mediated visibility mostly fails to expose the systemic structures that produce and sustain the invisibility of cleaning and cleaners, and does little to sensitize participants to the ways in which their own lives are shaped by patriarchy. The article contributes to the growing feminist scholarship examining how gender and class come into public visibility through social media platforms and the “digital mamasphere,” and the implications of this visibility for the configuration and reconfiguration of power relations.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 October 2020
Revised 22 April 2021
Accepted 22 April 2021

KEYWORDS

Social reproduction;
visibility; social media;
domestic work; gendered
relations; class

Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis has thrown into sharp relief just how vital the work of “key” or “essential” workers such as caregivers and cleaners is for our lives and survival. Indeed, these workers and their labour constitute an indispensable condition for the reproduction of life. However, many of these life-making and life-maintaining activities, which are performed disproportionately by poor women, women of colour and migrants, have long been underpaid, overworked, and hidden from view. Work such as the cleaning of people’s homes, on which this article focuses, is cast systematically as a “background condition” (Nancy Fraser 2016). Struggling against the invisibility and devaluation of housework and care work has been a cornerstone of the feminist fight at least since the 1970s: the struggle to make visible and demand public valuation of activities that are stubbornly cast as “women’s work” and “rendered invisible, not only as a form of ‘real work’, but also because it is hidden in other people’s homes” (Kim England 2017, 367).

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The media constitute key spaces and agents of visibility. Over the last decade, a growing body of scholarship has highlighted the role different media play in affording visibility to people, places, issues and experiences previously hidden from public view (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018; A. Mubi Brighenti 2010; Shani Orgad 2012; John B. Thompson 2005). Studies show how media visibility can be a politically productive and transgressive force, disrupting dominant discourses and narratives and contributing to the symbolic rehabilitation, inclusion and recognition of that which has been obscured, marginalized and/or ignored. Social media platforms, in particular, have become pivotal spaces for marginalized subjectivities to be heard and seen, to demand respect, recognition and rights (e.g. Noor Al-Qasimi 2011; Anthony McCosker 2015). But visibility has ambivalent effects: it can enable recognition and generate empowerment while at the same time it can discipline, regulate, divide and exclude (Andrea Bighenti 2007). Feminist scholarship has demonstrated and underscored how gender, sexuality, race, class, age and (dis)ability come into public visibility through media networks, platforms and flows in ways that are entangled within hegemonic configurations of power (Radha Sarma Hegde 2011). While the new visibility afforded by social media opens a space for subversion of and protest against the invisibilizing of marginalized subjects, it can simultaneously further their marginality and vulnerability and be used to police, target and attack them (e.g. Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018; Ranjana Das 2017; Mia Fischer 2019; Elena Gapova 2015; Janelle Hobson 2016; Christina Neumayer and Luca Rossi 2018).

In this paper we seek to bring together and contribute to these two critical debates: about the general invisibility of social reproductive work (that is, maintaining households and caring for children, friends, family members and communities) and the (in)visibilizing power of social media. The article contributes more broadly to the growing feminist scholarship examining how gender and class come into public visibility through social media platforms and the implications of this visibility for the configuration and reconfiguration of power relations. Specifically, we look at how paid domestic cleaning and the people who perform it are made visible on social media. We address this question by examining discussions on the UK's largest parenting website, Mumsnet, a communicative space where women, and mothers in particular, share and exchange knowledge and experiences. How do domestic cleaning and cleaners materialize on this site? In what ways do Mumsnet discussions afford visibility and valuation of this historically invisible and undervalued gendered, classed and racialized labour and the people who perform it? And how does the visibility endowed to paid cleaning labour on these forums contribute to reproducing and/or challenging power relations and inequality?

The paper is organized in four sections. In the first we look briefly at feminist critiques of the devaluation and invisibility of social reproductive work, and housework in particular, and research on the (in)visibility of domestic work in popular media and social media. The second section outlines the study's methodology and the third presents our empirical analysis. We conceptualize Mumsnet discussions as a "visibility sensor"—a technological and affective space that captures, analyses and relays information and feelings in ways that help visibilize the gendered and classed labour of cleaning and sensitize users to the precarity and contribution of this work and those who perform it. At the same time, we discuss the limitations of this sensor: the ways it obscures crucial aspects of cleaning and its labourers, and its unresponsiveness to certain kinds of stimuli—in particular, the structural challenges of neoliberal capitalism and patriarchy. We

conclude by reflecting on the possibilities created by a platform such as Mumsnet becoming such a “sensor” and the limitations of the visibility it affords.

The background condition

Social reproduction and domestic work(ers): feminist critiques

The invisibility and devaluation of social reproductive work has been at the centre of feminist critique and politics. The International Wages for Housework (IWfH) campaign in the 1970s centred “the analysis of housework as the crucial factor in the definition of exploitation of women in capitalism” (Silvia Federici 2012, 6). Feminists have consistently exposed the labour involved in caring for the home, for men and for dependants and critiqued how its material and economic devaluation and naturalization as “housework” or “doing nothing” have helped fortify the reproduction of gender inequalities (Ann Crittenden 2001; Ann Oakley 1974). Partly as a consequence of this struggle, in the 1960s and 1970s social democratic welfare states shifted some elements of reproductive labour like early childhood education and childcare—which under the postwar “family wage” model were largely expected to be performed by a full-time, financially dependent wife—into the public sphere (Nancy Fraser 2013). Although this move propelled a dramatic rise in enrolment in higher education and participation of especially middle-class women in the workforce, the state remained heavily reliant upon the devalued reproductive labour of women. Since the 1970s, neoliberal capitalism has rendered the “family wage” norm financially impossible for most people, as many high-income economies such as the UK have witnessed declines in real wages. Even as the number of waged hours required to sustain a household has steadily increased, social reproductive services have been radically stripped back (Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek 2018).

As a result, a “private market in caring services” (Sarah Stoller 2018, 113) has emerged to meet the challenge of “reconciling paid and unpaid work for ever more women” (ibid.). In the UK, one in ten households employs a domestic cleaner, and this number is on the rise (British Cleaning Council 2020). These workers are overwhelmingly women and more likely to be migrants than is average for the national labour force (British Cleaning Council 2017, 2020). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that at least 67 million adults are employed worldwide as domestic workers, 80% of them women.¹ Many of these workers operate in a “global care chain” by which poorer women, especially from the global South and Eastern Europe, are increasingly taking over the care of children, elderly parents and homes for more affluent families in the global North (Arlie Russell Hochschild 2003; Rhacel Salazar Parreñas 2015).

Despite their significant contribution to private families and society at large, these workers are largely hidden from public view (Mark Bergfeld and Sara Farris 2020; Laura Briggs 2017; Daniela Cherubini and Sabrina Marchetti 2020; Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russel Hochschild 2003; Sarah Dyer, Linda McDowell and Adina Batnitzki 2011). Among the different types of domestic workers, cleaners are at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy and the most invisible and devalued (Ehrenreich Barbara 2002; Nicky Gregson and Michelle Lowe 1994). Drawing on Ehrenreich’s (2002) undercover exploration of low-paid jobs in the US, Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003, 4) describe the domestic cleaner as a kind of *dea ex machina* who must restore tranquillity to middle-class homes and then

“magically fade from sight”. Even feminist scholarship, which has paid considerable critical attention to the issue of housework (e.g. Stevi Jackson 1992; Ann Oakley 1974; Sheila Rowbotham 1973), and to the global politics of domestic work (e.g. Bridget Anderson 2000; Rosie Cox 2006; Helma Lutz 2011), remains relatively silent on the subject of paid domestic cleaning and the people who perform it (for exceptions see Ehrenreich 2002; Lotika Singha 2019).

Media representation of paid domestic work

Erin Hatton (2017) describes three types of mechanisms that invisibilize the work of social reproduction: legal, spatial and cultural. The media are key cultural mechanisms: they contribute to the invisibility and devaluation of social reproductive labour by both *not* representing it and *representing* it in ways that naturalize, normalize and legitimize its continuing lack of social, political and economic recognition and valuation. Research on the (in)visibility of reproductive labour in the media focuses primarily on maternal labour and highlights the under-representation and construction of mothers’ care and housework as “natural” and the product of intrinsic love (Lara J. Descartes and Conrad Kottak 2009; Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels 2004; Shani Orgad 2019).

However, the mediated (in)visibility of paid domestic cleaners has received far less attention. The small number of existing studies about contemporary representations of domestic workers focus almost entirely on caregivers, especially nannies (Ron Becker 2007; Ashley McFarland 2015; Stephanie Patrick 2017), babysitters (Miriam Forman-Brunell 2009) and grandparents (Sanna Inthorn 2018) in US film, television, and celebrity news (Shelley Cobb 2008; Deborah Jermyn 2012). One notable exception is Suzanne Leonard’s (2008) examination of the growing visibility of domestic workers in American popular culture—though this too focuses primarily on nannies and exclusively on US media. Leonard shows how popular narratives celebrate domestic workers while papering over the fundamental inequities at the base of the labour economy in which they are employed, encouraging viewers to direct anger at individual targets rather than unjust systems. The few other existing studies focus on constructions of the “maid” in American popular culture, highlighting the deeply gendered and racialized legacy of the Black and/or Latina maid (Patricia Hill Collins 2000; Ashley McFarland 2015; Mike Wijaya Saragih 2018). In the Chinese context, Wanning Sun (2011) examines cultural constructions of the female migrant maid, showing how they intersect with class, place, and nation, and how the maid acts as a metaphor for the unequal power relations at both national and transnational levels.

Investigations of the representation of domestic workers, and especially cleaners, on social media are scarcer still. Tripti Lahiri’s (2017) *Maid in India* documents how online forums such as Facebook provide spaces for women to give recommendations about potential maids, compare salaries and discuss appropriate etiquette. Writing about South African social media, journalist Kwanele Ndlovu (2019) argues that bullying of domestic workers is rife on these sites, with domestic employers frequently complaining about their “incompetent” and “techno-backward” workers. Both Lahiri and Ndlovu underscore the dark side of visibility: for instance, domestic employers’ online exchanges of photographs of their workers as a means for surveillance, control and degradation. Cara Wallis (2018) presents a more ambivalent and, perhaps, more hopeful account, of the visibility that

social media spaces afford domestic workers in China. She argues that platforms such as Qzone and WeChat offer these workers valuable therapeutic and empowering spaces, but that the visibility that social media affords these workers does little to challenge and transform their “ubiquitous invisibility” (Wallis 2018, 215) in the Chinese public sphere.

Studying Mumsnet

Existing studies show Mumsnet is a lively communicative space where gendered subjectivities come into public visibility, and in this process are negotiated, contested, regulated, and shaped by hegemonic configurations of power and gendered narratives (Ranjana Das 2017; Yvonne Ehrstein, Rosalind Gill and Jo Littler 2019; Jai Mackenzie 2018; Liz Moor and Shireen Kanji 2019; Sarah Pedersen and Janet Smithson 2013). Building on this research and on the literature discussed in the previous section, in this study we treat Mumsnet as a communicative space that affords domestic cleaners and cleaning labour visibility through users posting about their personal experiences, feelings and views. Following Moor and Kanji (2019) and Ehrstein, Gill and Littler (2019), we treat Mumsnet as a space for deliberation, where users engage, often in intensely affective fashion, in the negotiation of moral norms and standards, particularly as they relate to life within the family unit. Our interest in Mumsnet discussions about domestic cleaning is situated within wider debates about the “digital mamapshere” (Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim 2017)—specifically, its ambivalent potential to facilitate making connections between private frustrations and difficulties and wider analyses of structural power relations, and to encourage the cultivation of new configurations of care, collectivity and solidarity (Ranjana Das 2020; Ehrstein, Gill and Littler 2019; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017).

Our analysis focuses on the Mumsnet Talk discussion boards, where users engage with one another using self-selected screen names. The only way to engage publicly with a given post on these pages is to reply to it using text and/or emojis; Mumsnet Talk threads do not have “like” or “share” functions, and so amplification of certain viewpoints over others occurs primarily through repetition across multiple posts by multiple users. The site has no formal barriers to participation and curatorial interventions by site administrators are rare, so exchanges between users can often become heated and agonistic.

Most of our sample was drawn from the popular AIBU (Am I Being Unreasonable) subgenre, where users seek opinions on conflicts in their personal lives and relationships. AIBU threads serve as regulatory spaces where users’ intimate experiences and feelings are governed through collective negotiation of what is deemed “acceptable” and “unacceptable” to say, think and feel in a given situation (Ehrstein, Gill and Littler 2019), and where normative values and boundaries within the community are established (David C. Giles 2016). These negotiations take place through advice-seeking and opinion-giving, which tend to be confrontational, sardonic and anchored around a normative “Mumsnetter” identity that is explicitly gendered (female) and implicitly classed (middle-class) (Pedersen and Smithson 2013). Details of the lives and circumstances of individual Mumsnet users are not accessible unless volunteered in their posts. Unfortunately, there is a lack of demographic data available about Mumsnet users, and the most recent available Mumsnet census is over a decade old (2009).² It indicates that the site’s participants self-

identify overwhelmingly as women (98%), mothers (95%), white (84%) and as living in the UK (95%). Recent research assumes the site users to be predominantly middle-class women, a high proportion of whom university educated and economically privileged. However, Lotika Singha's (2019, 58) study of domestic cleaning shows that the "Mumsnetter" demographic does not capture only the very wealthy. The Mumsnet posts she analysed included both affluent "ladies who lunch" and women less well-off—still privileged enough to be able to afford to hire a cleaner, but unable to do so without trade-off with other expenses.

The findings we present here are based on thematic analysis of 7,569 individual posts across 36 Mumsnet Talk threads. These posts were collated through the platform's Advanced Search function using the keywords "cleaning," "cleaner" and "housekeeper," with the final sample limited to posts garnering more than 100 responses from users. While Mumsnet users' posts are clearly a very different type of representation from the kinds of media texts discussed in our literature review (e.g., film and television), we approach them as mediated texts to show how they too are embedded in popular discourses (e.g., the notion of cleaning as "magical" or "non-work"), and how they articulate and help to establish normative values and ideas about domestic cleaning and cleaners, gender, class and ethnicity. The timeframe for our sample was 1st March 2018 to 28th March 2020 – purposefully extended slightly beyond a two-year frame to capture the first few weeks of the first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK, when a ban was imposed on cleaners working in employers' homes. This move sparked a period of heated discussion in UK public discourse, and particularly on Twitter,³ often referred to as "cleaner-gate".

The data were analysed using NVivo and coded inductively. Informed by the literature review, we started the coding with two broad themes in mind (visibility/invisibility and individual/structural) and then developed a more detailed thematic coding scheme through a preliminary analysis of 10% of the total sample. We continued adding further codes as analysis of the full sample progressed, to reflect themes identified in the data (see [Appendix 1](#) for the full list of the 42 codes).

Mumsnet is an open-access forum: posts are in the public domain and no password is required to read them. The site's Terms and Conditions state that the posts and threads are viewable by non-members. After consulting other studies of Mumsnet (Das 2017; Mackenzie 2018; Moor and Kanji 2019; Pedersen and Smithson 2013) and the Association of Internet Researchers' ethical guidelines on the use of online data (Aline Shakti Franzke et al. 2020), we decided not to secure informed consent from Mumsnet participants for this study. When we quote directly from Mumsnet posts, we endeavour to do so in short, non-identifiable ways (e.g. words or phrases used repeatedly by participants), only occasionally using extended quotations to illustrate and substantiate our claims. We have also removed participants' screennames from the quotes to further protect participants' privacy and anonymity.

Mumsnet Talk as a visibility sensor

Moving the background condition to the foreground

Mumsnet posters often recognize the pivotal importance of a cleaner in facilitating work-life balance and maintaining mental health, with cleaners described frequently as “life savers,” “life changers” or “the cornerstone of my life.” The reliance on this crucial source of support is divulged most conspicuously when posters discuss occasions when the cleaner does *not* or *cannot* perform the cleaning job: for example, when she has to cancel. “My house has been a tip,” [and] “I’ve got to do it all by myself (pregnant + toddler, and dh [dear husband] works long hours),” reads a typical post expressing panic and distress at being without a paid cleaner in the home, which became more pronounced on the forum during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some repliers direct anger at the cleaner for letting her employer down, casting her as selfish or irresponsible, while others defend and empathize with the cleaner.

Whether through appreciation and praise of the cleaner and her work or anger, upset and dismay at her failure or inability to perform it, Mumsnet provides a kind of a visibility sensor which highlights, often in highly affective ways, the crucial contribution of domestic cleaners and their labour. Against the persistent invisibilizing of cleaning work, the Mumsnet discussions spotlight this work, moving it from the background to the fore. In the same way that a sensor converts stimuli such as sound or light into electric signals, through their repetition, Mumsnet participants’ expressions cumulatively translate into an overall sense of the profound dependence of these posters on their homes being cleaned regularly by another. At the same time, how cleaning work and cleaners are made visible on Mumsnet is fraught with tensions and contradictions—as we discuss in the succeeding sections.

Cleaning as magic: visibilizing effects while obscuring labour

As a visibility sensor, Mumsnet Talk is far more responsive to the *effects* of cleaning than the *labour* required to produce them. Metaphors such as “life changer” or “life saver” regularly highlight the dramatic impact of the cleaner and her work on the poster’s life, while commenters often describe their cleaners as “gold,” “gold dust,” “diamond dust,” “fairies,” “magic,” “magicians,” “godsend,” and a “gift from heaven.” In the same way that popular representations depict the nanny as “a surrogate angel in the house” (Leonard 2008, 116), such metaphors and similes romanticize the cleaner and invest her with fantastical (and even divine!) qualities. The fantasy of the magical female cleaner is perpetuated, also, by disappointed commenters who complain about the scarcity of good cleaners: “When it comes to cleaners I have kissed a lot of frogs and still waiting for my prince,” says one commenter, invoking fairy tale imagery. Another poster refers to her cleaner as “Cinderella,” the domestic servant whose shimmering horse-drawn carriage turns back into a pumpkin at midnight.⁴ Such fairy tale metaphors imply that the work the cleaner does is easy, light-touch and momentary—like waving a wand or kissing a frog. Moreover, the notion that a good cleaner is “worth her weight in gold” (repeated in different variations across the threads) obscures the very real economic undervaluation of cleaning labour, regardless of its quality or necessity. Thus, while romanticizing cleaners

on Mumsnet endows them with extraordinary value, it simultaneously papers over the precarious social and financial conditions of their lives and labour.

Indeed, posts repeatedly naturalize and minimize domestic cleaners' skills and labour (observed in 26 of the 36 threads we analysed). Whether commenters praise their "good cleaners" or deride their "bad cleaners," the *actual work* cleaners perform is rarely made explicit. Rather, references to this work are often euphemistic and vague: my cleaner and her sister "blitz the house together," writes one woman, while another describes cleaning as "pushing round the hoover and flicking the duster," explaining that "it is no effort if a bit time consuming." Cleaning is also minimized through comparisons to other (mostly feminized) jobs like nursing, teaching and elderly care, with cleaning usually described as "unskilled" and less valuable by comparison. "Try being a care worker, or working in a day nursery. [A] LOT more responsibility for [a] lot less money," writes one poster in response to a thread about whether or not £10 per hour is a reasonable wage for a cleaner. Such comparisons (87 identified in our sample) reinforce the profoundly gendered, racialized and classed distinction between "unskilled" and "skilled" jobs, which has historically helped legitimize wage inequalities by stigmatizing care labour and pitting women in these undervalued professions against one another (Bergfield and Farris 2020).

However, the backgrounding of cleaning labour is occasionally disrupted when cleaners themselves participate in Mumsnet discussions. Our sample included 165 posts from self-identifying cleaners, which document the actual work of cleaning in expansive detail. For instance, an extract from a lengthy post written by a woman who worked as a cleaner for ten years reads:

Downstairs I had to clean the sitting room, HUGE kitchen/diner, a utility room that was bigger than my kitchen, a very large conservatory, study, and a huge hallway. The sitting room was carpeted, the rest of downstairs was laminate, that I hoovered and washed . . . I was always thorough, cleaning skirting boards and windowsills, and if a window had marks on it (usually the kitchen) I'd clean that as well.

This and similar contributions send out "pulses" that disturb and disrupt the invisibility of cleaning and its devaluation as easy work. Yet such "pulses" are scarce compared to the multiple posts that buttress the fantasy of cleaning being easy, effortless non-work.

The cleaner: now you see her, now you don't

Mumsnet Talk discussions have the potential to help illuminate not just the work of domestic cleaning, but, importantly, also the *people* who do it. While participants never refer to their cleaners by their names [unlike in Tripti Lahiri's (2017) and Kwanele Ndlovu's (2019) accounts of social media], posters often describe their cleaners' ethnic and/or national background, their family composition and, sometimes, their education. These references often trigger quite confrontational conversations, where posters challenge what they consider to be classist or sometimes xenophobic assumptions and draw attention to the stark socio-economic disparities between cleaners and employers. In one thread, a poster urges the OP (Original Poster) to ignore an unpleasant note she received from her cleaner. She writes: "You are a lady. A lady who engages Staff. She's a slovenly numpty." Another commenter, herself a cleaner, uses the "Quote" function to

copy and paste this phrasing—a common technique used by participants when taking to task another post—and responds angrily:

This sounds quite patronising. OP is a “lady” and the cleaner is “staff” and a “slovenly numpty”!!! Im a cleaner and its shit bhow we are looked down on sometimes!

Other posts by cleaners similarly resist what Angela McRobbie (2020) terms feminine incarceration: working class women being seen in stereotypical and denigrating terms by others and seeing themselves in these terms. For example, discussing their labour, cleaners on Mumsnet detail “scrubbing dry urine off the wall,” “cleaning dry vomit from a bathroom” and “clearing out gunk from a plughole.” These posts refuse the association of domestic cleaners with dirt, an association that has historically allowed their Othering and abjection (Barbara Ehrenreich 2003; Lucy Delap, 2011). Spelling out the dirt they are required to remove, making visible the fact it is their employers’ dirt, rather than their own, and underscoring the labour involved in clearing it, can be thus read as an act of symbolic resistance; that is, an act of visibly separating women’s own bodies and selves from the dirt they are required to clean.

Cleaners also post to assert their agency and to challenge widespread devaluation of cleaning as “unskilled” or “low value” work, as in the following example:

Cleaners earn decent money for what they do?! Maybe where you are! But it’s all minimum wage here. Unless you think that’s “decent money for what we do” ... Depending on the hours and work environment it can [be] gruelling

On another thread, where multiple cleaners exchange stories about the generous or miserly Christmas gifts and bonuses they received from their employers, one poster writes:

I’ve heard on the grapevine at least two of my clients aren’t happy about [my taking two weeks off] and think I’m being unfair to leave them that long without a clean. I was starting to feel guilty, but having read this thread it’s been eye-opening to realise just how taken for granted and under-appreciated I am ... so fuck ‘em! And my prices will be going up in the new year!

In these instances, Mumsnet affords women working as cleaners a platform to challenge their employment conditions and relations, and to disrupt and undermine, even if momentarily, their devaluation. However, posts by cleaners remain a minority on these threads compared with those of employers or prospective employers.

Of the 124 posts we identified that explicitly engage a critique of structural power and inequality, the overwhelming majority focus on economic inequality and class. The Mumsnet “sensor” is attuned to power relations as they work through these registers, especially through expressions which dehumanize or degrade cleaners. However, the gendered aspect is rarely recognized: that the cleaner is almost always a woman, employed by a “lady”, is rarely commented on (27 out of 124 posts), reinforcing the commonsensical notion that cleaning—both the actual work and its management—is women’s work. Race too is almost never discussed; only 10 posts mentioned race in the entire sample, 8 from a thread about representations of Black cleaners on television.

As in an earlier example, posters often use the Quote and Reply functions to detect information they deem classist or otherwise dehumanizing and transmit it back to the

group, converting it into a call, sometimes a reprimand: imploring participants to see the women they employ to clean their households, recognize their precarity and act to support them. In the same way that a sensor triggers an alarm when it detects irregular stimuli such as movement, sound or light, so too such interventions sometimes alarm Mumsnet participants, disturbing their “normal” way of talking about cleaners, and demanding them to recognize the cleaner, and her conditions, needs and feelings, in *her* own terms. For example, in another thread, an OP complains about being asked to keep the heating in her house at a certain level because the woman who cleans her house feels cold at work. After numerous posts debating optimal house temperature, and after various nasty comments made about the cleaner who “probably doesn’t work hard enough if she’s cold,” one participant wrote:

So many posters on here saying how many degrees is too hot or too cold ... the point is whether this particular cleaner feels cold or not! I don’t think it would be unreasonable to put the heating on/turn it up for an hour before she arrives, then turn it down/off when she leaves. I think it is BU [Being Unreasonable] to expect someone to work in uncomfortable conditions, be it too hot or in this case, too cold.

This post is a vivid example of the “alarm pulses” that the Mumsnet sensor occasionally triggers, drawing attention to potentially uncomfortable aspects of the employer-cleaner relationship that are otherwise denied in the conversations. Here, the poster diverts attention from the question that has up to that point dominated the discussion (optimal house temperature) to the cleaner as a worker who *feels* things and whose body has certain needs. The post disrupts what Wanning Sun (2011, 202) describes as “the holy grail that every middle-class employer is in search of,” namely, “a docile body who knows her place and never forgets her station.” Though Sun refers to popular narratives of the rural maid in urban China, a similar dynamic can be observed in the discussions of Mumsnet’s largely UK-based middle-class participants, who repeatedly deny the cleaner as an embodied subject who needs things—here, a warmer working environment. Posts such as the one cited above unsettle, even if monetarily, this denial. To deny one’s basic bodily needs, they reprimand, is “BU”: Being Unreasonable, a Mumsnet abbreviation which here has a strong ethical resonance.

Critique also manifests on Mumsnet Talk through conversations about the language participants use to describe the people cleaning their homes. One poster, for example, comments that the term “my cleaner” is possessive and degrading, though most replying posters disagree. In this same thread, the OP talks about tutoring the daughter of the woman she employs to clean her house, to whom she refers as “mini-cleaner.” Many posters repeat this term in their responses, but some draw attention to its highly derogatory and classed connotations. However, closer interrogation of this classist discourse is resisted for the most part: one poster explains that the use of “mini-cleaner” is consistent with Mumsnet lingo, while another says: “I can’t help but think that if it was ‘minidoctor’ or ‘minidentist’ you wouldn’t be complaining.” Quickly, posters stop discussing it; the critique is shut down. Nevertheless, even when fleeting, such discussions open a space for critical reflection on how language and its uses are enmeshed with power.

The visibility afforded to cleaners on Mumsnet Talk thus contributes concurrently to their valuation and devaluation. Even when cleaners are praised, it is most frequently on basis of their character rather than the performance of their work. The adjective “lovely”—

which is distinctively gendered both in use and attribution (Shala Barczewska and Agata Andreassen 2018)—dominates such posts alongside other descriptors like “thoughtful” and “loyal,” which depict good cleaners as obedient feminine nurturers. Speaking good English is frequently mentioned as a personal virtue; a coded way to imply that British cleaners are better than migrants. In a similar fashion to popular films’ showcasing of the domestic worker’s personality, on Mumsnet, too, she “accrues symbolic rewards not merely for the work she does, but more importantly, for the person she is” (Leonard 2008, 112). Furthermore, many of the posts that use descriptors such as “honest,” “reliable” and “trustworthy” tacitly imply that cleaners with these attributes are valuable because they are unusual. A “good” cleaner is set apart not by the quality of her labour, but by her deviation from the stereotypical dishonest, unreliable and/or untrustworthy cleaner.

References to “bad cleaners,” which abound on these forums, tend also to focus on the cleaner’s character rather than the quality of her work. These cleaners are frequently represented as threatening and even criminal—constructions which echo those Tripti Lahiri (2017) and Kwanele Ndlovu (2019) found in their respective observations of Indian and South African online forums. In Mumsnet users’ negotiations over what defines a “bad cleaner,” personal failures and character flaws are overwhelmingly foregrounded: from “liar,” “con artist,” “thief,” “taking advantage,” “taking the piss,” “scammer,” “illiterate,” “stupid,” “lazy,” “ungrateful,” “unhinged,” “barking,” “incompetent,” “a complete moron,” “greedy,” “dick,” “horrible,” “cow,” “right ignorant,” “twat,” “bitch,” “spiteful,” to “nasty piece of work.” These and other derogatory descriptions of character flaws were used by the posters in our sample almost four times more frequently than descriptions of poor cleaning work.

The sensor’s limits: individualization and self-responsibility

As our analysis has highlighted so far, Mumsnet constitutes a site of struggle over the meanings and value of domestic cleaning and the people who perform it. However, the communication that circulates on this site is designed to be sensitized to specific “stimuli.” Critical responses, such as the ones we have cited, overwhelmingly focus on individual flaws and failures. For example, while posts regularly highlight class and income disparities, they tend to target individual, ostensibly wealthy commenters, rather than the system that produces and legitimizes wealth disparities. “Christ, how big/dirty is your house? Are you the Queen?” questions one poster in response to an OP who does not want to give holiday pay to the woman who cleans her house for 30 hours per week. “Could she muck out the unicorn stables next week?” asks another sarcastically. Similarly, fair pay and treatment for cleaners tend to be framed as individual responsibilities, at the discretion of the employer, who is either “generous” or “miserly,” “wonderful” or “tight,” a “gem” or a “git.” Deeper interrogation of the economic system producing such stark wealth inequalities is sidelined, as is the possibility of valuing the social contribution of cleaners’ labour beyond what employers are able and willing to pay for it.

Of course, the focus on individual stories is not surprising; AIBU is explicitly positioned and designed as a forum for individual participants to share personal experiences and views. However, what seems striking is the limited extent to which these Mumsnet Talk discussions connect the personal and the political, and their limited capacity to translate

individual grievances into a structural critique of systemic injustices. In her study of women's testimonials on the website of the UK activist group Raising Films, Susan Berridge (2019, 16) argues that while these testimonials are framed as personal complaints, their collective presentation constitutes "a kind of consciousness-raising ... in which the personal is rendered political." In contrast, our analysis suggests that Mumsnet conversations mostly do not transcend individual criticisms to calls for structural changes, especially in relation to gendered and classed power relations—a limitation echoed by other studies, which show how discussions on Mumsnet promote individualism, self-responsibility and therapeutic interventions to structural problems (Ehrstein, Gill and Littler 2019; Richenda Gambles 2010; Das 2017; Tracey Jensen 2013; Mackenzie 2018; Moor and Kanji 2019; Sarah Pedersen and Deborah Lupton 2018).

The individualization of critique on Mumsnet also reinforces the construction of cleaning as "women's work," by frequently framing the need for domestic cleaning as a response to women's individual shortcomings such as laziness, incompetence, indifference or failure to achieve a work-life balance. Even when criticizing exploitative or dehumanizing behaviour, posts often subtly re-responsibilize women for cleaning. In one thread, a poster shares a story about using the toilet at a house she was cleaning and finding her employer lurking outside the door, "eyebrows raised," when she left. "Enough time to lurk outside the loo, judging your cleaner? Enough time clean your own fucking loo ..." comments one poster by way of support. What is left obscured in most of these discussions are the economic and social conditions that have given rise to domestic cleaning as a viable service industry—toxic work cultures with long working hours, high living costs, weakening social infrastructure and lack of state support, unprecedented economic and social inequality, and crucially, the uneven gendered distribution of labour within the home.

Indeed, employing a domestic cleaner is frequently positioned as a solution to unequal division of labour between couples—a pattern identified in other research about heterosexual families who employ domestic cleaners (Gregson and Lowe 1994; Singha 2019). If a woman has "to do it all by [herself]" because "dear husband works long hours," as in the opening example in our analysis, outsourcing the work of cleaning to another woman is often positioned as an easier fix than finding a way for "dear husband" to do his share. Thus, both the labour of cleaning and its management are frequently self-responsibilized or naturalized in participants' posts as "women's work," often papering over how women who employ cleaners themselves remain embedded in patriarchy.

Women who work as cleaners are also often cast as self-responsible subjects who make personal choices free of structural pressures and constraints. One poster justifies her decision to continue employing her cleaner during the Covid-19 lockdown by explaining that the cleaner had been "fully informed" of the risks to which she (the cleaner) would be exposed and was nonetheless "v happy with that." That many cleaners have been extremely anxious about continuing to clean people's houses during the pandemic but need the money (Georgia Aspinall 2020) received scant mention. While many posters call on employers to continue paying their cleaners through the lockdown while allowing them to stay at home, almost all frame this financial support as being at the discretion of employers' generosity or kindness. Only few frame this as an ethical responsibility or employer obligation, and fewer still

highlight the UK government's responsibility for ensuring the wellbeing and livelihoods of domestic cleaners through the pandemic.⁵

That said, occasionally posters do connect personal frustrations, emotions and dilemmas to critiques of structural inequality and systemic injustice. In particular, sick pay and holiday entitlements for self-employed cleaners are a popular topic. While these discussions mostly focus on specific cases and are often predominantly practical or instrumental, their repetition helps to highlight the precarity of cleaning work and the responsibility employers and the government have to support and protect cleaners. Similarly, the distinction between unskilled and skilled labour is occasionally disrupted and its implicit assumptions revealed. For example, in response to a discussion about an appropriate hourly rate for domestic cleaners, where several posters refer to cleaners as being "unskilled," one commenter writes astutely:

So this unskilled manual worker has actually developed both their cleaning skill set and their understanding of basic business principles to a point where they understand the market, they understand supply and demand, and they are pricing accordingly. Huh, not bad for a dumb old unskilled manual worker, eh?

Another poster is quick to endorse this intervention, after which, there are no more descriptions of cleaning as "unskilled" work. Comparisons that pit cleaners against workers in other poorly compensated, largely feminized professions such as caring and teaching are also sometimes challenged. One participant writes: "Care workers are badly paid but so are most cleaners. This thread is a nice illustration of how an insecure labour market can be used to set low paid workers (and frequently women) against each other in a battle for the bottom." However, critical interventions such as these are rarely amplified through repetition from multiple posters and tend to remain anomalous and scarce in the threads in which they appear.

Conclusion

Mumsnet Talk forums constitute spaces where families' reliance on the historically devalued and invisibilized work of cleaning is made publicly visible. They act as a visibility "sensor," encouraging participants to see the women they employ to clean their households and sensitizing their ethical relations to them—from drawing attention to the language used to describe cleaners, to reflecting on the conditions of their employment. Similar to a sensor, posters first detect expressions that invisibilize and devalue cleaning and cleaners—derogatory and dehumanizing references to cleaners, classed stereotypes, and descriptions of the cleaning job as easy, natural or unskilled—and then transmit this "detected" information back to the group to critique. This critique is sometimes translated into direct alarms reprimanding participants to recognize and support the cleaner and her work.

A crucial feature encouraging this sensibility is the participation in the discussions of both women who employ cleaners and women who work as cleaners. In the context of neoliberalism's ongoing degrading of social reproduction and the diminishing of its value, Mumsnet offers a space for women across the classed employer/cleaner divide to share and discuss their—sometimes opposing—thoughts and feelings. It is a communicative space that highlights how essential cleaning and the people who perform it are for the

functioning of family life and society at large, especially under contemporary capitalism. Indeed, while Mumsnet participants often complain about the work their cleaners do as fleeting and unsatisfactory, their posts, collectively, convey how intolerably hard life *without* a paid cleaner can feel.

At the same time, like any sensor, Mumsnet Talk is a space where only particular stimuli are responded to—and some more emphatically than others. First, the discourse on Mumsnet is predominantly individualized and so the structural conditions that underpin the invisibility and devaluation of social reproduction remain largely outside the realm of its sensor's stimuli. Consequently, the visibility Mumsnet discussions afford to cleaning and cleaners tends to reinscribe its meanings within a gendered neoliberal logic. Most discussions fail to connect personal frustrations, emotions and dilemmas to a political critique of capitalism, austerity or gender injustice (see also Ehrstein, Gill and Littler 2019). Even appreciative posts, which clearly value the paid work of cleaning, rarely move beyond the personal to recognition of structural inequalities and the fault lines of a capitalist system that has made families reliant on this indispensable yet profoundly undervalued “background condition.” The “resulting impulse” of this visibility sensor is too, on the whole, individualized, encouraging users to self-responsibilize and find solutions to problems that are framed as private affairs: pay the cleaner over Christmas “if she’s worth it to you,” if you can’t afford a cleaner “that’s your own issue,” and if your cleaner needs to stop coming during the Covid-19 pandemic “Clean your own damn house!”

Second, contributions that highlight the structural conditions of inequality and collective action are rarely amplified through repetition by multiple posters. Rather, they are mostly muted, either directly through discursive push-back or indirectly by being ignored completely. As Ranjana Das (2017) demonstrates in her study of childbirth stories on the platform, the reproduction of dominant ideas and/or representational paradigms on Mumsnet Talk operates primarily through the collective silencing of fringe perspectives and counter-discourses, and so critique, too, must struggle through these negotiations in order to be heard. Thus, the Mumsnet sensor can also *censure* or even *ensor* critical interventions, regulating the visibility and attention given to discussions about structural injustice.

Third, while Mumsnet Talk furnishes a space where participants can speak across the employer-cleaner divide, these crucial exchanges remain predominantly among, between and about women. Indeed, men were conspicuously absent from most of the discussions we analysed. While in other Mumsnet discussions women talk and often complain about their “DH” (Dear Husband) not pulling their weight (Ehrstein, Gill and Littler 2019; Mackenzie 2018; Moor and Kanji 2019), in the discussions we analysed there was barely any mention of posters’ male partners⁶ as potential participants in doing and managing the cleaning of the house. Rather than fantasizing about a more even and equitable distribution of social reproductive labour in the home, the fantasy *du jour* for Mumsnet posters is to outsource the gendered cleaning burden to the “Cinderella” figure of the paid female cleaner. Thus, the Mumsnet sensor does little to sensitize participants to the ways in which their own lives, and those of the women they hire as cleaners, are shaped by and embedded in patriarchy. In this context, posts by women who self-identify as single mothers sometimes disrupt this elision. Unlike posts by heterosexual coupled women that

frequently position the employment of a cleaner as an easy fix, allowing the unequal division of labour at home to go on undisrupted, occasionally single mothers' posts highlight the outsourcing of cleaning to a domestic cleaner as a response to structural failures, specifically employers' and/or the state's lack of support. We could not develop a discussion of this aspect within the space of this article. However, future investigations of the "digital mamasphere"—especially in relation to its capacity to connect personal troubles, choices and dilemmas to critiques of patriarchy and neoliberalism—would be enriched by closer engagement with the experiences of single mothers who employ domestic cleaners.

In conclusion, while the Mumsnet sensor makes visible the devalued, historically invisibilized work of cleaning and its labourers, it mostly fails to capture, analyse and relay the structural power inequalities inherent to the employer-cleaner relationship and the profoundly gendered inequalities underpinning this work and its consequences. Rather, it largely sustains and reinforces the fantasy of having a perfectly clean home as predicated on privileged women employing poorer women to do this work and then "magically fade from sight" (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003, 4). Thus, like the visibility afforded to other gendered subjectivities and experiences by different communication technologies, so too the mediated visibility of cleaning on Mumsnet has ambivalent, contradictory and uneven implications. On the one hand, Mumsnet functions as a sensor that exposes and sensitizes users to what Radha Sarma Hegde (forthcoming) calls "gendered elisions"—cleaning being a potent example, which Covid-19 has thrown into sharp relief. On the other hand, this mediated visibility works to regulate, legitimize and reinforce gendered power relations and narratives that sustain gender inequality. "The objective of feminist intervention, Hegde writes, "is to highlight elisions and interpret systemic justifications of these silences." Indeed, as we have shown, Mumsnet discussions make an important, if ambivalent, contribution to the first aspect of this intervention—visibilizing the "background" work of cleaning and its working-class female labourer. Yet the second part, namely the systemic structures that produce and sustain cleaners' devaluation and invisibility, remain mostly elided on this popular parenting website.

Notes

1. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/who/lang--en/index.htm>
2. We contacted Mumsnet to request up-to-date demographic data but unfortunately did not receive a reply.
3. In May 2020, two UK media commentators—Owen Jones and Sarah Ditum—clashed on Twitter over how people who employ domestic cleaners should respond to the Coronavirus lockdown (see Aspinall 2020). Jones called on people to keep paying their cleaners through the lockdown but ask them to stay home for their safety, condemning those who continued to have cleaners enter their homes during lockdown as "shockingly selfish." Ditum countered that without paid assistance the burden of keeping homes clean during lockdown would disproportionately fall on women who were already facing additional caring responsibilities. Media commentary on the "cleaner-gate" often framed the debate as a choice between solidarity with cleaners or solidarity with middle-class mothers. Ditum was widely criticised for neglecting cleaners as themselves working-class women in her "feminist" critique of Jones, while Jones was accused of papering over the uneven gendered distribution of cleaning and care labour in middle-class homes in his admonishment of those who continued to use the services of cleaners during the pandemic.

4. Singha (2019, 103) similarly notes references to “cleaning fairies” made by some UK users of domestic cleaners.
5. By contrast, on May 13 2020, as part of the “cleaner-gate” exchanges on Twitter, Jones tweeted that “the government should be sustaining people’s income in ways that avoid them coming into contact with a potentially deadly virus, otherwise official policy is protecting middle-class professionals who can work at home and risking the lives of working-class people.”
6. Heterosexual partnerships were foregrounded as the norm in our sample: across the threads there were 195 references to having a husband, but only nine to having a “partner” or “spouse” and just two to having a wife. Though considerably less common, some posters also self-identified as single parents.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Ranjana Das, Rosalind Gill, Radha Sarma Hegde and the anonymous reviewers for their generous, insightful and extremely helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Department of Media and Communications, LSE.

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Appendix 1: list of nodes

Node 1: Individual

- (a) Asserting individual power over cleaner
- (b) Bad cleaner (bad labour)
- (c) Bad cleaner (bad personal attributes)
- (d) Competition/comparison with other professions
- (e) Good cleaner (good labour)
- (f) Good cleaner (good personal attributes)
- (g) Individualized appreciation or anger
- (h) Private responsibility and choice (cleaner)
- (i) Private responsibility and choice (employer)

Node 2: Structural/Collective

- (a) Capitalist exploitation
- (b) Class, race, and gender critiques
- (c) Household labour distribution
- (d) Social value (of cleaning)
- (e) Solidarity and alliances with cleaners
- (f) Structural support (or lack of support)
- (g) System-directed anger

Node 3: Visibility

- (a) Individual call-outs
- (b) Visibilizing the cleaner (as an individual, defined by more than her job)
- (c) Visibilizing the precarity of cleaners' employment
- (d) Visibilizing the financial burden of hiring a cleaner
- (e) Visibilizing the labour of cleaning
- (f) Visibilizing the reproductive necessity of cleaning
- (g) Visibilizing the unequal power relationship between cleaner and employer
- (h) Visibilizing the value of cleaning (to the poster's life)
- (i) Visibilizing how hiring a cleaner enables work/life balance

Node 4: Invisibility

- (a) Class and race anxieties/discomfort/guilt
- (b) Commodification and "consumer transaction" frame
- (c) Dehumanisation and/or degradation
- (d) Depoliticised benevolence
- (e) Devaluation
- (f) Market-based valuation

- (g) Erasing the power imbalance: employer vulnerability
- (h) Erasing the power imbalance: “mutually agreeable” frame
- (i) Erasing the power imbalance: “part of the family” frame
- (j) Hiding labour
- (k) Infantilisation
- (l) Minimisation of outcome or contribution
- (m) Naturalisation or minimisation of labour
- (n) Romanticization and fantasy
- (o) Scarcity frame (for “good cleaners”)
- (p) Stereotyping (gender, race, age, and class)

Node 5: Posts by Cleaners