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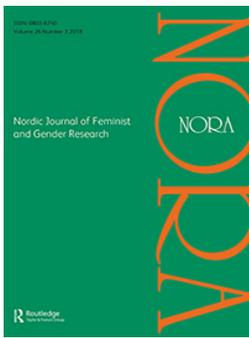
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# “F\*\*\* this shit” - Negotiating the Boundaries of Public Expression of Mother’s Negative Feelings

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## ABSTRACT

In 2017, Finnish celebrity Sini Ariell published a blog post titled “F\*\*\* this shit” in which she revealed her difficult feelings as a mother of a newborn baby. Attracting attention from Finnish media, the post went viral. Through the empirical analysis of affective reactions to the post on an anonymous online discussion board, we explore how the limits of the public expression of negative maternal feelings are negotiated and maintained, but also challenged. Our results highlight the normative, even punitive dynamics of the digital intimate public, as commenters on the discussion board often argued that struggles and unhappiness during motherhood should not be made public but dealt with in private. However, ambivalences and supportive comments suggested the possibility to challenge norms surrounding motherhood and widen the discussion of difficulties and inequalities in motherhood and family life. Based on our analysis, we argue that affective articulations of anger, anxiety and exhaustion may challenge the digital intimate public’s “infrastructure of happiness”, and they thus have political potential to disrupt the ideals of good motherhood and address the affective struggles that mothering often entails.

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## Introduction

FUCK THIS SHIT that this day-to-day real life is with a newborn. It’s so true, your home becomes a prison. You get a couple hours of sleep per night. I can’t even remember when I last slept from evening to dawn. [...] Being awake is a continuous struggle while you try to figure out why is it whining or screaming this time and nothing really makes it easier ... Not a lot of eye contact yet so it’s mentally very tiring to hang out with a living doll. [...]

Everything is about the baby. When you finally make it out of the house for two hours, you pour wine down your throat with both hands and everyone that comes over to talk asks how things are going, even discussions with strangers are all about the baby shit!! [...]

Our relationship has fallen in a deep rut, and now we’re trying to scrape together little moments or talks of love. We are both so fucking exhausted. It makes you feel like just getting up and leaving. [...] The best part of course is that you can’t under any circumstances say that you hate this stuff.

— Two hours after posting this—

Now that the media seems to have again torn this post into their news, I’ll add here that the most beloved thing in the world is my little Penny girl ❤️

Don’t send me hate mail, I’m not going to read it or react to it. I don’t give a fuck about any sanctimonious bullshit about this.

These are extracts from a blog post (Ariell, 2017) by Finnish “celebrity” Sini Ariell, known for her work as a tattoo artist and in pin-up modelling industry, and participation in various reality TV shows. In the post she revealed her difficult feelings and exhaustion as a mother of a newborn baby. The post went viral as her story quickly hit the national tabloid headlines (Iltalehti, 2017; Iltasanomat, 2017a) and provoked moral outrage in Finnish digital media forums. Following the controversy, Finland’s biggest national news platform, *Helsingin Sanomat*, invited Ariell to keep a video diary of her life, and also published an article about her (Helsingin Sanomat, 2018). She was invited onto TV talk shows to discuss her experiences as a new mother and the taboos surrounding motherhood. These public discussions focused on contextualizing and understanding her difficulties and life changes she had faced (her move from Finland to Australia, a new marriage in a foreign country, her unexpected and difficult pregnancy after infertility diagnosis, the baby’s health problems and her post-natal depression).

Ariell’s blog post caught the media’s attention at a cultural juncture when public representations of motherhood are arguably becoming more diverse. Mothers are behaving badly on TV and in the cinema (Littler, 2019). There has been a proliferation of personal blogs where mothers share details of their private lives and frustrations, and confess to being “bad mothers” (e.g. Lehto, 2020; Mäkinen, 2018; Morrison, 2011; Orton-Johnson, 2017). Many of them voice their intention to dismantle maternal myths and vent about the ideals of good motherhood. However, most previous research has approached blogs and other media products as cultural representations of motherhood, and has concluded that such expressions of negative feelings and failures are often only permitted within certain limits—limits that always reinforce middle-class ideals of good, attentive motherhood (Lehto, 2020; Orton-Johnson, 2017).

Poststructuralist feminist theory has highlighted the rise of biopolitics and how neoliberal ideas of governmentality are transmitted and received across public media platforms (e.g. Ehrstein, Gill, & Littler, 2019; Jensen, 2013). Pedagogies of intimate life are transmitted and enforced in the digital intimate public that attach value to white, middle-class, heteronormative subjectivities, relationships and intimate practices. Further, neoliberal culture not only requires subjects to work on their bodies, characters and intimate lives, but also attempts to shape what people are allowed to feel—and how their emotional states should (not) be displayed (Ehrstein et al., 2019). Thus, the digital intimate public reinforces—rather than challenges or disrupts normative notions of motherhood, intimacy and heterosexual nuclear family life.

This article’s analysis of the controversy around Ariell, and of the emotions and affects it aroused in the audience, offers a more nuanced perspective on the political potential of sharing intimate feelings, disappointments and unhappiness in the digital intimate public. We focus on a discussion thread that Ariell’s blog post generated in an anonymous online forum. We are particularly interested in how the limits of the public expression of raw, negative maternal feelings are negotiated, maintained and challenged in the digital intimate public. We argue that the more open sharing of struggles and inequalities that mothers experience does open possibilities, albeit tentatively, to challenge hegemonic norms surrounding motherhood, and to recognize and accept the existence and public expression of “inappropriate” maternal feelings.

## **Motherhood displayed in intimate publics: representations or interventions?**

Currently, there is a surge of maternal complaint (cf. female complaint: Berlant, 2008) in popular media, and increasingly in research. For example, Littler (2019) has studied representations of “mothers who behave badly” in movies (the *Bad Moms* films) and TV shows (*Motherland, Catastrophe*); she interprets them as descriptions of mothers who are fed up with the inequality embedded in (heterosexual) nuclear family life, which materializes in unequal divisions of child-rearing, housework and mental labour. Similarly, mothers who write family blogs often distance themselves from “perfect” motherhood by making ironic remarks about the norms and confessing

themselves to be “bad mothers”. However, when bloggers confess to being “bad”, they do so in ways that allow them to remain “good mothers” in the eyes of their audience (Lehto, 2020).

Consequently, it is important to ask whether the changing media landscape is truly transforming the everyday realities of motherhood. Do these “new” representations of motherhood translate into a broadening of the boundaries of the acceptable, or do they do the opposite? Paradoxically, the norms of motherhood seem to be becoming more intensive and restrictive. Over two decades ago, Hays (1998) argued that demands that mothers should temporally, financially and emotionally invest in their children were constantly growing. In addition, the norms of motherhood are difficult to resist, even when women understand these norms as personally restrictive (Smyth & Craig, 2017). The ideal of intensive, attentive mothering is increasingly narrow yet compelling in a society where the management of risks is seen as essential, and where access to professional knowledge about psychosocial needs and child development has improved (Lee, Bristow, Faircloth, & Macvarish, 2014).

Berlant (2008, p. viii) suggests that social media platforms are increasingly important sites “of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an x”. The lines of appropriate intimacies, relationships and feelings for mothers are drawn and intensified by post-feminist neoliberal capitalism, and mediated affectively in digital intimate publics (Gill & Kanai, 2018). In her study of how mothers discuss postnatal depression, Jaworska (2018) concludes that anonymous online discussion forums are important for women to revoke taboos and exercise agency by reworking the hegemonic discourse on motherhood (see also Evans, Donelle, & Hume-Loveland, 2012). However, Pedersen and Lupton (2018) argue that the expression and understanding of negative emotions is only done within certain limits: practices or feelings that fall outside these limits may be considered unacceptable or pathological. Middle-class ideals of motherhood are reinforced and circulated in social media by the policing of others’ behaviours and emotions, and the moral authorization of one’s own practices (Ehrstein et al., 2019; Jensen, 2013).

Wilson and Yochim (2017) describe the digital intimate public of the “mamasphere” as a crucial space for mothers to vent their frustrations with the mundane responsibilities and disappointments of motherhood, and with prevailing inequalities in their heterosexual relationships and parenting. Yet in order to make their lives feel liveable and brimming with happy potential, mothers transform their struggles into positive affects by using irony and humour and posting happy family photos. Mothers highlight their own capacities for constant affective modulation, insisting on finding joy and happiness in the nooks and crannies of what has seemed like an unhappy everyday. Thus the mamasphere is an affective infrastructure of happiness, through which mothers emphasize their private responsibility for their families’ happiness and their relentless investment in it, with no capacity to imagine any alternatives (Wilson & Yochim, 2017). The affective modes of participation in the mamasphere, and the norms and ideals it transmits, enforce a particular set of neoliberal “feeling rules” (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Hochschild, 1979) and impose on mothers the emotional labour of tuning themselves into happiness and securing it for their family.

However, recent theorizations of the affective and psychic life of neoliberalism suggest that there is a need to better account for less upbeat expressions and representations by and about “unhappy” women in the media (e.g. Shields Dobson & Kanai, 2019). Turning our focus onto women’s and mothers’ anxieties, anger, frustrations and ambivalence, and to public responses that do not exclude ambivalence or disappointment, may open new research perspectives not only on attachments to the current cultural conjuncture, but also on ruptures and disinvestments that may have transformative political potential (see e.g. Donath, 2017). A focus on affects and emotions allows a more open analysis, perhaps even questioning the adherence to neoliberal ideals and “feelings rules”.

In their study of affective audience reactions to reality television, Skeggs and Wood (2012) argue that although reality television is an arena of mediated neoliberalism and morality, people engage with and respond to it in varying ways. The authors observe a great deal of ambivalence, playfulness and even resistance from the audience to “lessons of governance”. Consequently, they argue that reality television should be studied as an intervention rather than a mere representation, because of its emphasis upon affects and reactions over any determined meaning. Along similar lines, in this

article we study audience reactions to Ariell's blog post as affective, political and constitutive. We explore digital intimate publics as spaces of participation and engagement where mothers seek advice, entertainment and support. Thus, intimate publics intervene in and affect mothers' experiences and lives.

We approach affects and emotions as forces in social relations—intertwined with the social and cultural, but not wholly determined by them. For Skeggs and Wood (2012), a “reaction” is an action set in motion by a trigger where the response is registered physically. This definition is similar to the understanding of affect as a force in social relations: affect does not reside in individuals, but is a force moving between them. Affect is relational and refers to energies and intensities that are part of our bodies' capacities to affect and become affected (e.g. Kolehmainen & Juvonen, 2018). While affect often refers to intensities and sensations that escape the discursive, emotions are understood as affects that have been named and tamed into culturally recognized categories such as fear, disgust and joy. In our affective-discursive analysis, following Ahmed (2004) and Skeggs and Wood (2012), affect cannot be neatly separated from the discursive. Thus, we are able to analyse how affect (mis)aligns bodies and individuals with communities and ideas and is (counter)productive: it makes people do (or not do) things.

Furthermore, Skeggs and Wood (2012) note that an audience's affective reactions are entwined with and dependent on their social positions and personal investments. Affect acts as “*a force in the social relations*” (5). In other words, the kinds of feelings or behaviours that are allowed or perceived as desirable for mothers are revealed through affects and moral judgements. However, although we interpret both affect and emotion as social and cultural, and as often highlighting the lines of the normative, affect entails open-endedness and possibilities for new becomings (Kolehmainen & Juvonen, 2018). These theorizations of affect inform our understanding of how the digital intimate public makes us “feel” about motherhood, ourselves and society at large.

## Data and methods

The original post was published in Finnish, on both Ariell's personal blog and her Facebook page, on 11 December 2017. Ariell mainly writes in Finnish, but the posts are translated into English. The translation of this post appeared online the following day. At the beginning of this article, we used extracts from the English version. However, it was most likely the Finnish version that caught the attention of the Finnish media.

In this article, we are interested in Ariell's blog post less as a textual representation than as a communicative event (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). Platforms such as Blogspot (which Ariell uses) offer comment sections where readers can comment on the text and discuss it with others, including the blogger herself. The majority of Ariell's posts have such comment sections; however, the comment section was closed on both the Finnish and English versions of the post about her negative emotions as a mother. Thus the interactive potential of the post itself was rather narrow. Consequently, readers who wanted to engage with the post and exchange opinions had to find different routes. Ariell's post created discussions in the comment sections of several Finnish newspapers (e.g. *Iltalehti*, *Ilta-Sanomat*, *Helsingin Sanomat*) as well as on discussion boards focusing on motherhood and family life (e.g. Kaksplus.fi, Vauva.fi). The data analysed for this article comes from a discussion thread in an anonymous discussion forum on Vauva.fi. Vauva.fi is one of Finland's most popular websites, attracting around 500,000 visitors every week (a relatively high number, as Finland's population is 5.5 million). The majority of its discussions focus on family life (*vauva* is the Finnish word for baby).

We analyse the discussion thread that contained the most comments on the blog post. The thread appeared on the “free discussion” board, where discussion is relatively fast-paced as new threads emerge around the clock. This particular thread was user-generated, with 499 comments written between 11 and 22 December 2017. It became one of the board's most popular threads and appeared on the forum's main page. Following affect theories (e.g. Ahmed, 2004), we

interpret this popularity and intensity of reaction as a sign of the intensity of the affects and “stickiness” of Ariell’s post. However, like the “scandal” itself, interest in the thread was relatively short-lived. The majority of comments (343 in total) were posted within 24 hours after the thread appeared. The controversy generated by Ariell’s post, and around her as a public figure, is also an example of “*an emerging familiar model of trans-media shaming*” which is to some extent enabled “*by the traditional media’s parasitic recycling of social media feeds*” (Wood, 2018, p. 626). Paasonen and Pajala (2010) define similar practices of affective circulation as “intertextual media” where (negative) affects are generated and directed towards certain (public) figures: the more something is circulated across tabloids, magazines, evening papers and online discussion forums, the more affective value it accumulates.

Online discussion forums also have their own specific affective circuits, logics of functioning and public allure. Participants in discussions use varying strategies and motifs. Some occupy the position of “voyager” and browse through threads without leaving comments (a position we also selected as researchers). Others engage in discussions in pursuit of pleasure, entertainment, information, advice and social support (Jaworska, 2018; Pedersen & Lupton, 2018). Although many platforms have loose rules and netiquettes for participation, threads are often “*soaked with affect and antagonism*”, and exchanges are frequently “*petty, spiteful and bullying*” (Jensen, 2013, p. 128). Trolling (posting provocative comments intended to incite emotional responses, to keep the discussion alive) and flaming (posting insults or engaging in online arguments, usually involving unfounded personal attacks) are recognized practices. It is especially easy to find discussion threads and comments where intense affects—disavowal, irritation, disgust—and ideas about immorality, dirt and contagion are directed towards and attached to classed others (Jensen, 2013; Kolehmainen, 2017). At times, these include personal vilifications of public figures (Paasonen & Pajala, 2010).

All these elements were present in the discussion thread we study here. Indeed, it was the intensity and abundance of affect and condemnation of Ariell as a mother that first caught our attention. However, not everyone judged Ariell as a bad mother; many expressed their sympathy and understanding. These comments called for further scrutiny and a more open method of analysis. Our analysis was inspired by Skeggs and Wood (2012). Deploying an innovative combination of methods, Skeggs and Wood triangulated individual and focus group interviews with “text-in-action” research where researcher(s) watched television with participant(s). This allowed them to record viewers’ immediate affective reactions to television programmes as they were watching them. The researchers then went on to a close discursive analysis of the relationship between programme texts and audience reactions and comments.

In this article we ask how the audience reacted to Ariell’s blog post, in order to analyse the political potential of revealing negative feelings and frustrations in the intimate public. Studying anonymous comments as reactions to a blog post diverges from Skeggs and Wood (2012) text-in-action method: our textual data does not allow the analysis of immediate, embodied reactions such as laughter, gasps or tones of voice that might contrast with the discursive or be difficult to settle into decisive meanings. Instead, our affective-discursive method researches affects in texts. As described above, the thread comments were often dense with emotions and affects—irritation and disgust, but also sympathy and encouragement. In our reading of how commenters negotiated the boundaries of the public expression of maternal experience, we draw on Ahmed’s (2004) account of how affects and emotions do things, such as moving subjects “closer to” or “away from” ideas or objects. We also pay attention to the absence of emotions (e.g. Kolehmainen, 2010). Affective reactions bear some relation to cultural norms and ideals but are not completely determined by them. Like Skeggs and Wood, we also see the audience’s judgements as passing through their own lives, that is, with whether commenters align their own personal histories with Ariell’s experiences and feelings. Again like Skeggs and Wood, we follow a Deleuzian view of the workings of power in how negative affect leads to a diminished capacity to act. We therefore tease out how commenters’ affective evaluations and stances elucidate how what is perceived as intimate is (not) allowed to become public.

The commenters in the discussion forum visibly based their evaluations and judgements on Ariell as a celebrity familiar from “traditional” media such as TV and newspapers, and on her broader presence in social media (including her photographs on Instagram and Facebook). Thus, although we focus on one particular thread, affects are broadly generated and circulated in a wider digital intimate public (Paasonen & Pajala, 2010; Wood, 2018). Such social media engagement parallels the ways that audiences engage with reality television. For example, many of the thread comments imitated the visual and affective techniques deployed in reality television, such as “close-ups” on body parts and “judgment shots” about personal revelations, which invite viewers to make (and gain pleasure from) moral evaluations (Skeggs & Wood, 2012).

### **Affective reactions to Ariell’s blog post**

According to our analysis, commenters reacted differently to the blog post, and even to the same moments within it. Echoing Skeggs and Wood (2012), we found that affect often moved commenters to judgment because they made connections between themselves and Ariell, imagining themselves in her position. Through this judgemental gaze, commenters evaluated how they might have behaved or felt at a given moment. There were three main types of reaction to Ariell’s blog post. Affective distancing was created when strong, negative, hostile affects moved subjects away from each other, creating distance and even rejection. Some commenters reached out affectively, creating “towardness”, but ultimately enclosed those feelings in the private sphere. Others connected their lives with Ariell’s and hoped for a more open culture of discussion. These types of reactions varied in their political potential to challenge the prevailing norms and “feeling rules” of motherhood—what a (good) mother is allowed to feel, and whether she is allowed to publicly display negative feelings.

### ***Metonymic morality, affective distancing***

In the first type of response, Ariell was often labelled an unfit mother and placed outside the realm of respectable middle-class maternal femininity. These reactions especially paralleled the visual and affective invitations of reality TV, as commenters based their judgements on small details, “close-ups” on Ariell’s body parts, and revelations about her personal life (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). For many, Ariell’s social media presence was “too much” and signified poor taste, selfishness and bad motherhood. She was read as paying attention to the wrong things (her appearance and social media) instead of her baby:

The fact that her Insta account is filled with pictures of her bum and boobs is shocking in itself, but then she also has to underline that she has never liked babies. [. . .]Of course, when you spend time putting on that face and taking pictures of whatever body parts, then the baby’s hunger, wet nappy etc. will disturb you. (C13)

The audience engaged here in an evaluative process that Skeggs and Wood (2012) call “metonymic morality”, scrutinizing public figures’ body parts and practices so that these details come to represent the whole person—especially their immorality and failure. In the comment above, the distancing is apparent as the subject (“you”) is separated from the commenter. The focus was on Ariell’s “excessive” physical appearance (such as use of make-up and presence of visible tattoos) and various areas of her private life, which were often judged as receiving too much or little of her attention. The idea of excess was often attached to her appearance and practices. According to the commenters, Ariell (and mothers in general) should focus their time and energy on the baby full-time. Economies of time, in which a new mother was expected to invest her time and effort in a certain way (Skeggs & Wood, 2012), were an essential part of judgements condemning Ariell. Her presumed use of time (on hair, make-up, social media, going out, drinking, relationship problems) was contrasted with normative maternal behaviour that would turn away from the public. These comments suggested that her inappropriate temporal investments had led to her problems.

Presumed reckless behaviour such as going out and consuming “too much” alcohol signified that Ariell had not done enough in other areas of her private life, and had thus broken normative expectations regarding what a new mother should focus on (e.g. caring for baby, family and household):

According to the story, sometimes she goes to bars and drinks with both hands. Apparently someone else takes care of the baby every now and then. How much [does] the dad participate in childcare? I assume Sini does not clean or do housework. (C134)

The comment above exemplifies how the process of metonymic morality works, as details about Ariell’s private life are extended to signal other private shortcomings: Ariell was deemed lacking proper homemaking, therefore she has likely failed at proper homemaking. These aspects of maternity are affectively attached to each other, although the blog post itself does not contain any pictures of or direct references to housekeeping practices in Ariell’s family.

There were also responses where Ariell’s openness regarding the difficulties in her marriage was considered unacceptable. Openness about family matters was read as signalling immoral behaviour because keeping family difficulties private is a middle-class ideal (Nätkin, 1997).

Some comments showed individuals arriving at their judgements by reaching out affectively, trying to understand Ariell by comparing how they had felt and acted in similar situations (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). However, although these judgements passed through the commenters’ own lives, they did not seem to find a connection. As one commenter stated:

[She had] such a tough time with one baby. It wasn’t so difficult for me, even when I had my third one. I guess it’s one’s attitude that matters. (C6)

In many cases, the affective process ended in moral condemnation, and the judgemental gaze was used to make a distinction between the commenter’s and Ariell’s behaviour. Difficult feelings are individualized, as one’s own attitude and control over private matters are seen as the sources and solution to difficulties.

Others seemed to fear that openness was contagious and would “contaminate” (m)others, who would engage in reckless behaviour as a result (Wood, 2018). This might threaten their chosen values, and perhaps even the moral order more widely. Overall, the positioning of Ariell as an abject figure ended with commenters distancing and condemning her. Such antagonism and judgment towards negative maternal feelings and experiences reduces the possibility for other mothers to publicly open up if they fear defamation. This policing of maternal subjects thus maintains tight boundaries between public and private spheres.

### ***Faint connections, hiding feelings in private***

Dismissal of mothers’ difficult feelings was not the only reaction aroused during the discussion. In the second type of comment, commenters reached out affectively to find a connection with Ariell’s difficulties and exhaustion, in cultural narratives or their own lives. These commenters even provided Ariell with support, understanding and sympathy—but from a distance. Ariell’s feelings were recognized and considered legitimate, even essential to motherhood and the baby’s first year. However, negotiations over the most acceptable way to vent those negative feelings and frustrations were a common theme. There was a notably hesitant ebb and flow of ambivalent affects towards and away from Ariell; ultimately, her public display of feelings was not accepted.

I recognised a lot of my own thoughts there. But you should not say that in public in a newspaper with your own face on it and using those words, for the child’s sake. (C20)

Being in control of difficult feelings was deemed essential. While it was good to air negative emotions about mothering, commenters argued this should only be done in private, with selected close people (e.g. spouse, close friend, therapist):

Despite her difficult situation, a person living in the media should consider her words. Those are matters one can confess to one's best friend or a therapist. (C18)

It was further proposed that anonymous discussion forums were places where mothers could share difficulties and find support:

We [mothers on the discussion board] can understand that one can love the child above all but still feel frustrated and have a really hard time. (C209)

Here commenters related to Ariell's difficulties and provided support, albeit hesitantly in terms of proximity. They used passive verbs or first-person plural pronouns ("we") instead of showing a close connection to their own lives.

The most pressing reason for hesitation (and ultimately judgements) regarding Ariell's revelation of negative feelings was the aim of protecting the child(ren). One should not use one's own name and face, as the child might one day stumble across the mother's statements on social media and be traumatized by them:

Of course, when tired, everyone gets these 'I can't do this again' feelings. But a grown-up does not write f\*\*k this shit stories online and leave it there for her child to read. (C88)

Despite the affective reaching these reactions demonstrate, the commenters ultimately distanced themselves from Ariell. The establishment of distance from classed others has long been part of the constitution of the middle classes (Lawler, 2005). The blunt, raw nature of Ariell's public display of feelings was condemned. Further, several commenters not only responded "as if" they were in the same position as Ariel, but also imagined "as if" they were her child. Some referred to their own pasts, drawing connections between their childhoods and the imagined future of Ariell's child:

I read my mother's diary where she described the time when I was a baby and I can say that it left a mark on me even though I was not criticised there. [...] So I can imagine how Sini's child [will feel] in the future when she can read what her mother has written for EVERYONE to see. [...] I feel sorry for her [the child] already. (C477)

Protecting the child from the harm that commenters expected Ariell's blog post to generate was the main priority and moral duty, trumping the public voicing of difficulties during motherhood. What makes people moral agents is whether they reflect upon their decisions and weigh the consequences of their actions (May, 2008). However, the primacy of child(ren)'s rights can clearly also be used to silence mothers. Even though these commenters found connections between themselves and Ariell (and their supposed willingness to support mothers facing difficult emotions), their harsh judgements of public struggles diminish women's capacities to transcend the norms of motherhood.

### **Connecting lives, summoning publicity**

The third type of comment welcomed Ariell's blog post. Overall, most supportive reactions recognized both the existence of difficult aspects of motherhood and the need for more open public discussion. Again, however, the movement of affects was not straightforward. Instead, affects oscillated back and forth:

I would so badly want to crucify this woman's text as I cannot tolerate such a pushy celeb, but in these matters I share so many opinions with her. I have always loved and wanted children, and I knew that day-to-day life with a baby would be hard – but I did not realise how hard it actually is, and how much becoming a mother changes a person. When my one-month-old baby cries and nothing soothes her, I feel like pushing the baby back where it came from. [...] I do love my baby to the moon and back, but in dark moments I feel like leaving the baby with the father, packing my backpack and moving to Timbuktu. (C26)

This commenter, herself a mother of a newborn, recognized her urge to join the common reactions in the thread—intense annoyance, dismay and disgust—but the connection with her own current situation aligned her with Ariell. Nonetheless, she distanced herself from Ariell by commenting that, unlike Ariell, she had always loved children, and she (thought she) had made a conscious, well-

informed choice to have a baby. Becoming a mother is often considered an essential part of the linear heteronormative life course: the right timing and a stable relationship are important markers of responsibility (Sevón, 2005), whereas uncontrolled fertility is attached to those labelled white trash (Tyler, 2008). However, having recognized the surprising and radical change that motherhood had facilitated, this commenter ended by aligning herself with Ariell again. She admitted she could not tolerate her baby's crying, and she broke one of the biggest taboos by voicing a mother's impulse to get rid of or leave her baby. The intensity is enhanced by her use of the first-person pronoun, "I.". Recognition and alignment through such impulses or fantasies is notable, since they arouse dismay, outrage and even hate elsewhere in the thread. Ariell was considered immature for "blaming the innocent baby" and not understanding or responding to the baby's needs with patience.

Some commenters further applauded Ariell for her bravery and honesty in speaking out about previously taboo issues related to motherhood. These comments welcomed the more open atmosphere for discussion, and were the opposite of the comments in the previous subsection that discouraged the personal and open disclosure of negative experiences in order to protect child(ren). In these supportive comments, the public expression of difficult feelings was seen as an important act in itself:

I am someone who would badly want to judge Ariell, but this time I can relate. I think it's good that some people have the courage to step forward and say the way things are with their own faces. Because it's a taboo, how tough the time with the baby is, and not that many talk about it. [...] Some people have to be the first ones to bring this issue forward so that it can be discussed more widely. (C38)

Furthermore, some supportive commenters connected Ariell's experiences to their own lives by describing how they felt a past affective atmosphere had enforced their silence on difficult maternal feelings. It is interesting to note a certain emotional "coolness", even absence of affect, in these aligning and accepting comments, especially those inviting open discussion:

When my child was born, the negative emotions of motherhood were a total taboo, so quite quickly I learned how to hide them. I hope the current climate is more tolerant because nothing helps like airing out one's feelings properly. (C32)

Compared with the intensity of affects in the hostile comments that condemned Ariell, these comments contained rather matter-of-fact descriptions of mothers' views. Although the more open atmosphere was welcomed, the commenters did not seem personally invested in speaking about these taboos; there was a certain distance. The intensity and power of affects is more visible in the above commenter's description of how her own affects had diminished her capacities to act as a mother of a newborn baby and led her to conform to the hegemonic norms of motherhood. In some comments, the consequences of negative affects and the sharing of difficult feelings were described more concretely as fears of "*being labelled a bad mother whose baby should be taken away*" (C66). The legitimacy of this fear was highlighted by connections drawn to hostile comments within the discussion thread that judged Ariell and said her baby should be taken into care.

However, many commenters highlighted their beliefs and experiences that opening up was key to a mother's well-being:

We need to speak about these issues more, definitely without stigmatising the person speaking. Then the barriers to seeking help diminish when you know others have had rough times with their babies and it does not make you a bad mother. (C66)

For the shift towards a more open culture of discussion to be welcomed, brave acts like Ariell's are needed. Positive affects that offer support to those who express negative maternal emotions may increase mothers' capabilities to act, seek help and speak about their struggles. Being a relatable example can encourage other women to share their difficulties as well.

## Discussion

This paper has analysed the cultural unease around negative maternal feelings and their public expression. Our focus on affective audience reactions to public maternal complaint has offered a nuanced analysis of the political potential to disrupt the infrastructure of happiness that surrounds and is maintained around motherhood in the digital intimate public. We identified three main reactions that dis/connected the audience with/from Ariell and each other, and how these reactions sought to maintain, negotiate and challenge the norms surrounding maternal feelings.

A common reaction to the blog post was to morally condemn Ariell. These reactions, where the audience found no connection with Ariell, featured class antagonisms, scrutinizing details of her body, behaviour and feelings as well as their public display. Such details were interpreted as representing her failure as a mother, and she was deemed morally deficient. It is possible to conclude that the feminine mass media invites the audience into antagonisms and processes of social distinction (Jensen, 2013). Judgements of Ariell's feelings and their public display enforced strict middle-class norms where difficulties during motherhood and open, public complaint were a sign of one's personal failure to adjust to the role of wife and mother.

Some commenters reached out affectively, trying to understand Ariell's outburst by putting themselves in the same situation. They empathized with Ariell's difficult feelings and struggles; nevertheless, they distanced themselves from the public sharing of private matters. These comments expressed acceptance of mothers' ambivalent or negative feelings (Sevón, 2009) but reinforced the boundaries between public and private. This was a result of the affective anticipation that Ariell's child's future would be ruined. Privacy was enforced in the name of the child's best interests. These commenters considered that the negative affects were being directed towards babies, not towards the cultural demands of motherhood or the expectations of happiness that motherhood entailed. The protection of children overruled the need for more open discourse around the maternal, and closed down the political potential of complaint. These commenters accepted negative feelings, even in extreme modes, but enforced the common strategies whereby women push down their pain "for the sake of the children's happiness" and explain the inequalities of nuclear family life by referring to the cultural script of "the way things are" (Jurva & Lahti, 2019; Shields Dobson & Kanai, 2019; Sihto, Lahti, Elmgreen, & Jurva, 2018).

These reactions can be understood in terms of the primacy of the commitment to the promise of happiness that the nuclear family entails. Heterosexual nuclear family life is a cultural object loaded with expectations of happiness, reciprocity and stability (Ahmed, 2010). There are currently more and more maternal complaint in the intimate public (Berlant, 2008; see also Sihto et al., 2018) expressing frustration that these expectations are not met. However, previous research has suggested that the digital intimate public's affective structures and dominant affective modes require complaints to be brushed aside with humour, in order to maintain the attachment to this promise of happiness and the middle-class ideals of good, attentive motherhood. In addition, in neoliberal culture women are made individually responsible for their own troubles in motherhood and family life—and for solutions to those troubles (e.g. Gill & Kanai, 2018; Wilson & Yochim, 2017).

The condemnation and worry about the child's future may relate to the absence from Ariell's post of any obvious humorous resistance strategies that played with the ideals of perfect motherhood. Ariell later tried to explain that her post had been written with "*sarcastic humour*" (Ilta-Sanomat, 2017b). We interpret the apparent lack of humour in Ariell's post as more threatening when compared with the typical affective modes of family blogs. Even when Finnish mummy bloggers confess to being "bad mothers", they do so in such a way that their audience can still see them as "good mothers" thanks to the visible irony and sarcasm in their posts (Lehto, 2020). Ariell's absence of humour spilled over to the discussion board and was missing from the thread. Although the tone on this board is often humorous (Kolehmainen, 2017), full of parody, sarcasm, and light-hearted as well as serious trolling (Sanfilippo, Fichman, & Yang, 2018), the overall tone of the thread analysed here was strikingly serious. Consequently, humorous resistance strategies such as ridicule, exaggeration and sarcasm were also absent.

Thus, we argue that with Ariell's blog post, readers could not make the straightforward interpretation that the confessional "bad" signalled the truly "good". Ariell's post did not follow a linear narrative where difficulties during motherhood could be confessed according to an ideal of "through hardships to the stars". Instead, and despite its sarcasm, the blog post was unusually grim. The hostile and morally judgemental responses in particular can be understood through this framework, as Ariell's post clearly broke with the affective modes that maintain the mamasphere's infrastructure of happiness (Wilson & Yochim, 2017).

However, our most notable findings relate to the ways in which some commenters identified with Ariell's experiences, and welcomed the honesty and transparency they saw her blog post to represent. They also expressed desires to break the silence about mothers' negative feelings. These results may be interpreted as signs of a willingness to shake and break the infrastructure of happiness surrounding motherhood in the digital intimate public, i.e. to challenge the rules and norms determining suitable feelings for mothers. However, our analysis has also shown how difficult it is to challenge these norms (see also Jurva & Lahti, 2019). Much of the discussion welcoming the more open sharing of the difficulties mothers face was made from a certain emotional distance, as commenters recognized the risk of being labelled bad mothers. As Morrison (2011) argues, the political potential of maternal complaint, and the support provided to it in the digital intimate public, may get lost in the anonymity that allows the maintenance of a rigid separation between public and private. Further, the affective atmosphere in this particular digital intimate public was also individualizing, and commenters rarely made wider political or societal claims, e.g. demands for more public support for new mothers, or more equal sharing of care and household chores. Interestingly and importantly, however, our analysis has demonstrated that there is at least some cultural momentum to challenge the taken-for-granted infrastructure of happiness in the digital intimate public.

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