

## MATERIALS

### Rules of Engagement: Navigating the Realm of Online Mommy Groups

Cynthia Ing

#### Explanatory Note

Why do parent support groups on social media turn into spaces for competition and “Mommy Shaming”? And how do such encounters lead to a discussion on spectatorship?

Erika Fischer-Lichte notes that the “art of spectatorship relies on a willingness to undergo highly diverse, even disturbing and destabilizing experiences and corresponding transformations” (Fischer-Lichte 2016, 178). Parent support groups on social media exemplify these types of experiences and have innately transformed contemporary motherhood.

Motherhood and media have generated an array of discourse on our inherent relationship with social media in recent years (Arkass 2013; Arnold 2016; Podnieks 2012). Jiyoung Chae notes in her study on the influence of media on motherhood that, “contemporary motherhood is characterized by intensive mothering ideology, comparison, and competition” (2015, 508). This trend especially affects new mothers who have grown up searching online via Google (or asking Siri) for all their answers, foregoing more formal paths to information from experts (why go to a pediatrician when your child is sick—WebMD can answer everything). By seeking answers not only through search engines but also from opinions of other parents on these online support groups, comparison and competition then become commonplace as, “when opinions are evaluated, individuals feel pressure toward uniformity” (507). Those who do not conform to the opinions held by the majority are then shamed in vicious cycles of public ridicule, perpetuating an atmosphere of fear and failure if one cannot obtain, or maintain, the status quo.

In this reflective essay, I tell my journey navigating online mommy groups on Facebook for the past five years by dissecting how the process of commenting—being the active spectator and participant—on these threads descends into pandemonium and compels the readers and creators to transform how they present/perform their role of motherhood.<sup>1</sup>

Opposing parenting philosophies are so deeply entrenched in contemporary motherhood. The online communities on Facebook become the perfect breeding grounds for such controversy to bloom and infect. Vaccination is a hotly debated subject between anti-vaxxers and the medical community, which easily spills over into the posts by the keyboard warriors within these Facebook groups. Every time a new mother posts the question “What are your thoughts on vaccinations, Mamas?” a new show commences. Moms on both sides of the debate sling accusations of child endangerment, shaming those who do not agree with the “right side.” A slew of links to news and medical articles rains down the screen to support each side. Sometimes, memes and gifs are posted to instigate further disagreements. The absurdity that spirals out of this unassuming inquiry is both alarming and amusing to witness. Watching these comments roll down the computer screen and

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**Cynthia Ing** is a parent and doctoral student in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph. Her primary area of research investigates the nexus between intermedial and intercultural theatre practices, focusing on the impact social and digital media technology have on the formation of cultural identity.

wondering how the original poster will respond to this onslaught of opinions and information becomes a performance in and of itself.



## Welcome to 2018.

“Kate Jan 15 8.18pm Ten Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed, One Fell Off and Bump His Head.” *ME.ME.*, October 24, 2018, <https://me.me/i/kate-jan-15-at-8-18pm-ten-little-monkeys-jumping-on-21210400>.

### Joining the Mama Group

FTM = First Time Mom. LO = Little One. DD = Dear Daughter. DS = Dear Son. DH = Dear Husband. STTN = Sleep Through the Night. CIO = Cry it Out. SAHM = Stay at Home Mom. NBR = Not Baby Related. OP = Original Poster.

Acronym overload. These are just a few terms you will encounter when you enter the terrain of online mommy groups. When I found out I was pregnant with my now five-year-old, I thought it would be a good idea to find the right online support group for my many questions as a First Time Mom. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. I did not realize that the rules of engagement, or lack thereof, would be a fascinating journey into the performance of motherhood and the art of spectatorship.



## Facebook Mom groups: a summary

"Hold on snowflake let me ask the Facebook mommies." Facebook Mom Groups: A Summary." *ME.ME.*, April 30, 2019, <https://me.me/i/hold-on-snowflake-let-me-ask-the-facebook-mommies-facebook-431927>.

### Asking the Mama Group

The animal kingdom that shapes contemporary motherhood is vast and varied. Numerous ideological structures and philosophies that one can follow range from an overly protective Elephant Mom to a fiercely authoritative Tiger Mom, or even a contentedly permissive Jellyfish Mom. This animal imagery may offer a succinct way to reduce mothers to simplistic, all-encompassing definitions of mothering behaviour, and yet these distinct visual representations help navigate the groups' dynamic matrix.

I am technically a member of four different parenting groups on Facebook. Each group follows its own parenting philosophy. For example, two of the groups I joined take a specific gentle approach to parenting. One group focuses on gentle sleeping methods, such as co-sleeping, while the other specializes in breastfeeding advice and the benefits of extended breastfeeding. You will find the herd of Elephant Moms congregating within these groups. Although I have not participated in these two groups since my child was a toddler, I recall witnessing the mayhem every time a new member did not follow the ideology in the mandate of the group.

Never have I seen such devout followers than from within these dogmatic parenting groups.

I recall asking for strategies to get my then newborn to sleep through the night, and witnessing a thread of commentary leading to accusations of child abuse when another mother suggested I let my

child cry in timed intervals. Understandably, such a suggestion went against the gentle parenting ideology of the group; however, watching the comments roll in was both terrifying and superb. The verbal attacks on the parent for suggesting such archaic methods of torture and abuse dripped with deep condemnation. This was matched by the abrupt removal of the offending parent by the group administrators since this misguided parent did not follow the group's gentle parenting philosophy.

The Elephant Moms are strict with their rules and hierarchies.

Such an odd community it is that, on the one hand, advocates gentle holistic parenting techniques emphasizing open communication, and on the other has incredibly strict guidelines and aggressive rulings for members who do not conform. And yet, mothers purposely engage in these disturbing and destabilizing experiences to have a sense of belonging and support.



 Like

 Comment

   142

@CarolineHirons (Caroline Hirons), "I can't believe it's 2018 and we're still discussing breast vs formula like it matters at the end of the day," *Twitter*, August 4, 2018,

<https://twitter.com/CarolineHirons/status/1025871911992082432>.

### Fearing the Mama Group

Whereas the previous groups afforded a certain sense of anonymity due to me being able to join openly without any prior relationship to other members, the other two groups I joined are by invitation only. These invitation-only groups mean that you know at least one member (and very likely many more) on a more personal level. In the previous groups, I felt I was allowed more freedom with my comments. Within these invitation-only groups, you will find a mixed bag of

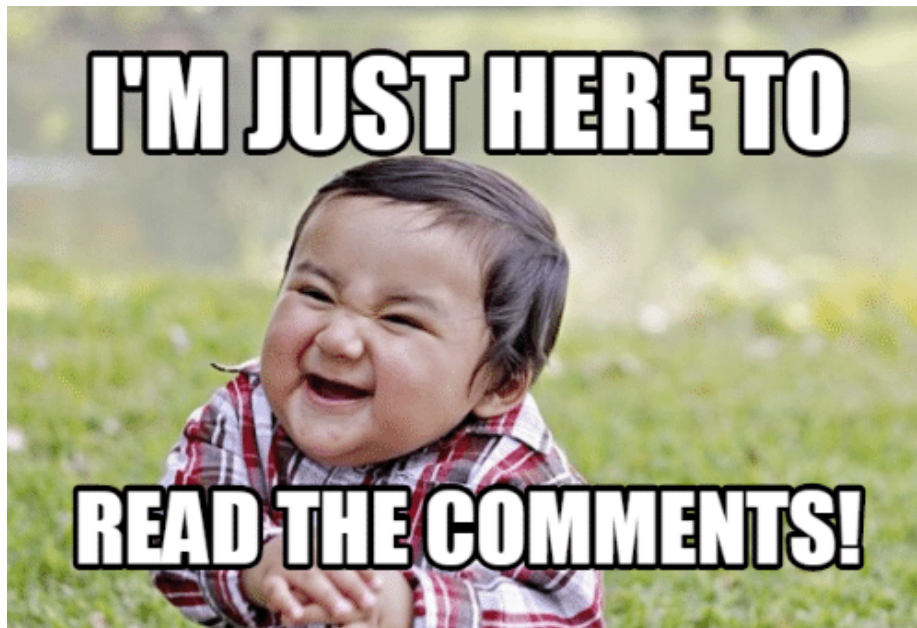
mothering philosophies, as often the core for the formation of these groups is based on the building of relationships.

The Elephants and Tigers roam freely here, with the Tiger Mom always poised to attack the slightest transgression, alongside the Elephant Moms who are just as resolute in defending their precious ideals, while the Jellyfishes will often just float around the periphery. Comments from another member can become deeply personal, and a singular opinion can quickly (and quite viciously) turn into a mob attack by many on the one unsuspecting person. It often feels like high school as I watch the comments roll down the page, some simply stating: “Are you serious?!” The claws of the Tiger Moms are swift and cut deep. I can envision the original poster surrounded by this group of menacing women pointing and laughing, while she hangs her head in shame. This act is not isolated to the interaction between the bullies and their unsuspecting victim; instead, it is on display for the entire group.

Spectatorship is vital to sustaining the status quo. The herd mentality can only be preserved if spectators are there to witness such public shaming.

This type of bullying spiralled so out of control in the third group I joined that the mom who was under attack for feeling that cupcakes didn’t need to be brought to school as birthday treats (truly, anything can be criticized by the group) created the fourth Online Mommy Group that I joined. This fourth group was aptly branded as “The Village,” which promoted a safe space for asking anything without fear of being criticized and condemned—a place more comfortable for the easy-going Jellyfish Moms.

The question that has struck me is how can any support group for vulnerable and often isolated new mothers become hostile and unsafe—why is this even a possibility?



“I’m just here to read the comments.” *Ballmemes*, April 30, 2019, <https://ballmemes.com/i/itm-just-here-to-readthe-comments-9633802>.

## Assessing the Mama Group

Witnessing these varied confrontations and online bullying was not what I expected when I decided to join the realm of online mommy groups. I honestly thought that I would use it like Google, but be able to ask follow-up questions. Instead, I have been embroiled in debates about “Breast-milk vs. Formula,” “Co-Sleeping vs. Cry-It-Out,” and “Which winter jacket is Car Seat Safe?”

By seeking answers from other parents on these online support groups, a constant need to compare mothering choices becomes an obsessive compulsion towards competition. Who really cares if your newborn slept through the night while another mother’s toddler still wakes frequently? Does it matter if your child was breastfed until they were three years old, compared to your friend’s cousin who formula fed from the beginning? The answer should be a hard “No!” but it is evident that the participants in these encounters have a dire need for validation. We need to know that our performance of motherhood is meeting the approval of the status quo.

The Facebook environment furthers this agenda of insecurity by the destabilization of communication. Misread social cues that we would normally understand face-to-face are even further skewed by the lack of facial expressions and body language. Sometimes, a smirking emoticon can cause havoc, especially when paired with some dry sarcasm.

The administrators of these groups cultivate god-like complexes, as they hold the power to add or remove members on a whim. Members will censor themselves or completely disengage from the conversation in fear of being “seen” by or upsetting the wrong person. I know that I have silently watched comments roll down my screen just to see how an argument would unfold rather than engaging with and then voicing my own opinion.

Silent voyeurism versus active spectatorship is often the trend for those who feel that watching equals neutrality. The question remains, can anyone ever truly be unaffected by what one reads and witnesses in these comments and posts?

The invitation-only groups are also often local groups—meaning there is a strong likelihood of meeting these Facebook moms in real life. I know many of these moms live near and frequent the same establishments I go to. There have been many times where I catch myself being watchful about how I speak to my child or present my way of mothering because one never knows if a Tiger or Elephant Mom is stalking you.

The judgment of the Mommy Group Panopticon becomes real.

As paranoid as it may seem, I have read rants by other mothers judging and exposing some wrong mothering they observe at the grocery store, mall, or park. The art of spectating, and invading the personal spaces of other mothers within these groups, has and continues to transform contemporary motherhood. My anxiety is heightened by this act of spectating—silently watching the back-and-forth commentary that often spirals into bullying and shame. The isolation of motherhood becomes more pronounced in these moments behind the keyboard.



Mnmoore316, "It takes a village to raise a child." Someecards, April 30, 2019, <https://www.someecards.com/usercards/viewcard/MjAxMyIjYjFmZmMwYzA4OThmNmRh/?tagSlug=family>.

### Embracing the Mama Group

But, with all the mean-spirited attacks that occur, there are moments of true camaraderie where the online community brings light and hope to each other. Often this is seen when someone is seeking clothes for a friend who lost everything in a fire, or when a child is diagnosed with a terrible illness. I have seen an outpouring of both monetary and emotional support for these mothers in need. Whereas reading about contentious parenting issues made me anxious about interacting with other moms, witnessing these acts of kindness motivated me to contribute and reach out to this community of alienated mothers on more than one occasion.

At times, great revelry is had with threads completely dedicated to the posting of memes or gifs to carry the conversation. It is amazing how a bit of silliness like this can be the highlight of a sleep-deprived mommy's day.

These acts of spectating—engaging in emotional confrontations, embracing cathartic revelations, and participating in random acts of kindness—have destabilized and informed my way of mothering. I imagine the pressure to maintain the ideal of perfection as a mother was there before the prominence of social media. The comparisons, however, were within the local community rather than the global one.

My take from it all:

In this animal kingdom, choose to be a Chameleon Mom who can shift from being a Tiger to an Elephant to a Jellyfish Mom when needed. Embrace empathy over judgment; we all struggle daily, so be kind to yourself and others. Spectatorship equals participation, even if it is only the act of witnessing. Elevate your fellow mamas over preserving the status quo, as it truly does take a village to raise a child, even if it is in the form of an online (and often dysfunctional) support group.

## Note

1. I specify “motherhood” for my reflection, as the Facebook groups that I have joined identify specifically as “Mom/Mama” groups.

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