THE POLITICAL IS PERSONAL: A CASE STUDY OF MAMABAKE, AN AUSTRALIAN COOKING GROUP FOR MOTHERS

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Abstract

This research examines alternative forms of political engagement in an Australian big batch cooking group for mothers, MamaBake. It uses qualitative methods to explore the ways in which mothers participate both offline and online, and challenge the widespread claims of citizens' declining political interest and engagement. The four interlinked journal articles, which form the body of this thesis cover a specific aspect of the MamaBake group. Focusing on the process definitions of politics, it argues that mothers are finding new and innovative ways to participate, but since their participation takes place in the private sphere, and in forms, which can't be easily quantified or measured, it often goes unnoticed by the proponents of the decline thesis. The thesis addresses some of the concerns associated with process politics by demonstrating how the 'political' can be expanded without turning it into a meaningless category. It also argues that the tendency to conceptualise alternative forms of participation in terms of their market orientation leads to a failure to recognise the important social developments. Overall, this research demonstrates the interactive and iterative nature of the public and the private spheres, and the significance of this to the study of political participation.

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Introduction

From the personal and private towards the political: Finding MamaBake

This thesis about alternative forms of political participation, using the Australian community group, MamaBake as my case study, had very personal beginnings. From what started off as a way to cope with parenthood, it slowly morphed initially into ideas about how the group had brought mothers who, parenting aside, had seemingly very little in common together, and subsequently into an analysis of its significance to the study of political participation on a wider scale. Such an analysis has obvious resonance with the feminist framework, which for decades has been grounded on the premise that the personal is political (Hanich 1970). While often repeated and theorized about, in 2010 the famous catchphrase gained a whole new level of personal relevance to me, as I found myself at home, negotiating my new life with a toddler and a newborn in tow.

At the same time, my support network was changing, as a result of both my own circumstances, as well as the opportunities that the new technologies were offering us. Too tired to organise catch-ups with my friends as the baby's reflux allowed us only brief moments of sleep, leaving us in a fog of relentless exhaustion, I found myself connecting with other people in similar circumstances online. I had of course utilised the vast amounts of parenting information online before, and participated in many traditional message boards, but this time it was different. As the parenting message boards had slowly started trickling over to using Facebook for organising, and mobile phones allowed easy browsing of the net without disturbing others, concepts such as time and place started losing their relevance. There, in the middle of the night, new

friendships were born out of shared experiences, with the 3am feeding sessions all of a sudden not only bonding the mother and the baby, but also the mother to the other mothers in similar situations, sharing intimate details normally only reserved to the closest of friends, and celebrating minor milestones insignificant in the eyes of the rest of the world.

It was there, in those endless moments in the middle of the night, that I looked up a Facebook page for a new Australian community group called MamaBake. Having heard of it from a few friends before, I was curious to find out what had sparked such excitement. The fact that it involved cooking big meals together in groups, sounded too labour-intensive and too much like a 50s housewife approach to actually hold any appeal. The page however, straight away stood out from the crowd; unlike many other parenting pages, it didn't take itself too seriously, poking fun at the housewife imagery, while at the same time acknowledging the reality of parenting and all it entails. The discussion topics were varied and insightful, and lacked the inane market-driven focus on baby paraphernalia preferences exhibited by so many other pages. The MamaBake page gained more followers every day, and some months down the track, when the baby eventually calmed down, I found myself participating in a local group with mothers I had never met in person before.

My online experience, as it turned out, was shared by countless mothers, with new interest groups, personal blogs and online businesses popping up everywhere, forming loose networks on social media and allowing people to pick and choose the aspects relevant to them. While the use (and overuse) of technology divides opinions, particularly in emotive topics such as parenting, one thing was certain: Mothers were voicing their opinions in social media, forming communities and discussing matters important to them.

The significance of such developments naturally extended far beyond the individual and personal level, and was soon noticed by the then Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard. To engage with this new demographic, Gillard invited popular mummy bloggers to a

morning tea at Kirribilli House[1] in June 2012, and subsequently for drinks in December 2012 (Grattan 2012).   Going into this uncharted territory, the events attracted dismissive comments from the public, as 'morning tea with a circle of women' was considered silly and not acceptable conduct for a Prime Minister - unlike the familiar male-driven activity of PMs fraternising with sports teams for example (le Marquand 2012) - showing just how deeply ingrained the gendered views of politics are in Australia. Similarly, in March 2013, Gillard had earned ridicule by inviting women who "blog about parenting, relationships, school lunches, cupcakes, baby names, water births and getting rid of pantry moths" to a dinner, instead of a group of veterans concerned about their military pensions (Devine 2013). Why it had to be either/or is unclear, but the overall message left no room for confusion: Mothers had no place in the political arena.

Gillard also faced resistance from her own party, with Labor MPs reportedly rolling their eyes as she brought up the topic of mummy bloggers and told her caucus to get on Facebook (Benson 2012). Labor's National Secretary George Wright supported her view highlighting the changing ways in which people consumed information, and noted that mums were now the biggest Facebook users after students. The figures he presented showed that 78 per cent of mums with young children used it an average of 1.9hrs a day, while only 19 per cent read newspapers (Benson 2012). Overall, the political strategy was well justified, with Gillard having recognised the fact that the blogs reached about 2.5 million people, and similar sites had been instrumental in securing the female votes for Obama in his re-election (Grattan 2012).

It is somewhat ironic that, at the same time as Gillard was criticised for attempting to connect with this new soft demographic, the political landscape was widely seen to be in turmoil. Academics and politicians alike were lamenting the citizens' decreasing levels of political interest and participation, and its subsequent impacts to democracy. The academic literature has been prolific (see for example: Putnam 1995, 2000; Bauman 2007; Boggs 2000; Jacoby 1999, Chandler 2009; Crouch 2004), and has reflected the trends observed in the real world, which has seen voter turnout diminishing in countries where voting is not compulsory (Macedo and Alex-Assessoh 2005; Putnam

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[1] The secondary official residence of the Prime Minister of Australia, located in Sydney, NSW.

2000; O'Toole et al. 2003; Stoker 2006). This literature often highlights the increasing individualisation of society as a threat to society, and views collective action as the most effective means for addressing issues of contention and changing status quo. However, not everyone accepts the decline thesis at face value and, instead, argue that citizens are finding new ways to participate. The problem is not so much the fact that people are not engaging in politics. Rather, the problem lies in the way in which 'the political' is conceptualised, with an overwhelming focus upon the formal political sphere and traditional political acts such as voting and lobbying (Norris 2002, 2007; Marsh et al. 2007; Hay 2007; Bang 2009; Akram et al. 2014).

As such, Gillard and Wright were, in many ways, ahead of their time, recognising the new trends driven by the internet and social media. However, without proper support from the Labor MPs, and in the often openly hostile media environment, the impact of their strategy could not reach its full potential. In that vein, following the election of the Liberal Government, the new Government's views on the importance of social media were completely reversed, with the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott likening social media activities to 'online graffiti', despite spending millions of dollars every year monitoring and engaging in it, and subsequently prompting the Federal Labor MP Rob Mitchell to tweet 'So now we are all vandals' (Battersby 2015).

Literature review

It was against this backdrop, that the personal experience of participating in MamaBake gained wider significance for me. MamaBake morphed into a project that moved away from the benefits of the organisation to the individual to its impact on both the broader society and the way in which we study political participation. The ways in which 'the political' is conceptualised, and subsequently the way in which political participation is theorised, varies significantly across the board. The most commonly utilised distinction is between arena and process definitions of politics (Leftwich 2004). As the name would imply, the former regards politics as occurring within certain limited 'arenas', so the focus here was initially upon Parliament, the executive, the public service, political parties, interest groups and elections, although it later further expanded to include the

judiciary, army and police (Hay 2007; Leftwich 2004). The arena definitions are largely based on Almond and Verba's (1963) seminal work *The Civic Culture*, which holds that not only citizens' participation, but also their support of, and trust in, the institutions of the government are essential for a stable democracy. Such accounts commonly utilise conventional repertoires such as voting and campaigning as measures of civic engagement. Pippa Norris (2002) has made significant attempts to extend the boundaries of the arena definition to challenge the common concerns about increasing political apathy, and to better reflect emerging forms of participation, but her focus is still extensively on the impact of action on the formal political arena.

The process definitions, on the other hand, are much looser. They conceptualise politics as occurring in all organisations and contexts in which people interact (Leftwich 2004). Hay (2007) notes the ways in which these definitions focus on politics as an open-ended process, concerned with holding power to account or drawing attention to matters of conflict. He conceptualises politics as having four features: *choice* (see also Weale 2000; and Lasswell 1950); *a capacity for agency*; *deliberation*; and *social interaction* (Hay 2007). The process definitions resonates with the way in which many feminist theorists have conceptualised politics, a point that I will return to in more detail later. While the process definitions allow us to expand our understanding of the political, they, simultaneously, bring the danger of conceptual stretching (Ekman and Amnå 2012; van Deth 2014). That is, if we start seeing 'politics' as existing wherever people interact, where should we draw the line, so as not to turn it into a meaningless category? These concerns are particularly pertinent for my case study, as it is mostly located in the private and the social sphere. This thesis consists of four publications, and, the first two articles will discuss the ways in which these concerns can be addressed in more detail.

However, what we do know, and what is less contested, is that there are significant and measurable gender differences in how people participate in politics in general (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010, Scholzman et al. 1994, 1999; Burns 2007; Fox and Lawless 2004; Verba et al. 1997). When using traditional measures of political participation such as political party membership, collective action and political contacting, women usually register lower levels than men (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010). However, there is also a significant body of literature which asserts that women are not less politically active

than men, but, rather, their participation takes forms which are not always recognised in the accounts of the decline in political engagement (Dalton, 2006; Harrison and Munn 2007; Stolle and Micheletti 2006; Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010). Research has also shown that women often prefer less bureaucratic and hierarchical and more informal and egalitarian networks, which explains why women are more visible in private activism, as well as (Stolle and Micheletti 2006; Hooghe and Stolle 2004; Inglehart 1997; Gil de Zúñica and Valenzuela 2011). The main lesson from this literature is that overall, the forms that participation takes have always been varied, but that the importance of the forms that take place outside the formal arenas has not always been recognised.

The disconnect from the 'traditional' and 'feminist' literature on political participation stems from the conceptual separation of the social and the political, and the private from the public. The public-private split has been much debated over the years, especially in the feminist literature, but, as Sapiro (2006: 166) notes, social capital theory suggests that the two don't function as a dualism as the private relationships may enable and facilitate the public ones. She cautions against over-simplified gender-based notions (private=women and public=men), and notes it would be more useful to focus on 'how the connections vary across circumstances, for different social groups, and historically'. For example, the parent-child relationships create different social capital for men and women, with parenthood often constructed as excluding, reducing or constraining access to politics for women, whereas, for men, children can constitute politically relevant social capital under certain circumstances (Sapiro 2006: 167); a point well illustrated by Gillard's attempts to engage with the mummy bloggers in order to connect with this soft demographic, and the media's negative reactions to it.

Here, it is essential to note the role of the internet in the recent developments, since the role of Facebook in particular is a central element of this thesis, and such developments have elicited a mixed response, ranging from overly pessimistic views (Sander and Putnam 2010), to ones which recognise its possibilities for creating new ways of social organising for action in the form of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Overall, internet use, unlike watching television and using other electronic media, has been shown to lead to higher levels of social capital, contradicting the social capital

theory of the 1990s, which emphasised the importance of face-to-face interaction for building trust (Hooghe and Oser 2015).

Putnam (2000), in particular, despaired over the lack of social cues in a computer-mediated environment; a position which has been widely challenged in recent literature (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Ellison et al. 2011). However, as noted by Hooghe and Oser (2015), much of this literature is focused on social media, which, by its nature, involves an element of networking and communicating with others (Jiang and de Brunin 2014). Consequently, Hooghe and Oser (2015) investigated broader forms of internet use and found that these did not have negative effects on conventional social capital indicators. In addition, they raise critical points about the classical social capital literature, noting that the indicators used in Putnam's *Bowling Alone* in particular are outdated in the digital age. However, Sander and Putnam (2010) remain unconvinced and have, among other things, expressed their skepticism regarding the depth of friendships on Facebook, where you can be 'friends' with people you have never met.

The rise of the various online forums for parenting related topics has of course been discussed in academic literature (see, for example, Pedersen and Smithson 2013; Gambles 2010; Phillips and Broderick 2014; Pedersen and Lupton 2016), with traditional message boards, such as Mumsnet in the UK, attracting a lot of attention, partly because of the sheer size of such forums. For example, Mumsnet had 4.2 million unique visitors in December 2013 (Pedersen 2014) and, as such, has significant potential to influence opinion (as well as provide rich data for researchers). Mumsnet is also highly politicised, with direct links to arena politics (Richardson et al. 2013). 'Mummy blogging' has similarly been investigated from many angles, including a focus upon its potential to define and redefine motherhood (Lopez 2009; Rogers 2015), identity (Gabriel 2016), community building (Hunter 2015) and the nature of blogging itself. As regards the latter, much of the discussion has concerned whether it is work or leisure, involving the construction of a community or an advertisement to increase sales, given the fact that popular blogs are often vehicles for marketing and product placement (Taylor 2016).

However, what has not been explored in enough detail, is how mothers participate in other forms of social media, which are often harder to measure, lack clear aims and promote the kind of participation that is fluid and based on convenience, lacks leaders and is characterised by horizontal, rather than top-down, structures. One obvious reason for this relates back to the first two points in the list, since the lack of aims automatically dilutes both the message and its impact, and, given the difficulties in measuring and quantifying data, it is perhaps unsurprising that such activities have had less attention than the big platforms like Mumsnet. The question of impact is particularly pertinent because it opens up questions about the inherent value of the practice: If it's not trying to influence either the political sphere, or the social sphere beyond the individual level, how do we determine its worth?

The second issue concerns the often-utilised distinctions between public/private, individual/collective and social/political. While some research has acknowledged the ways in which these function interactively and iteratively, and the public/private distinction has been a central theme in feminist literature for decades, there is still a tendency in the mainstream literature to treat these distinctions as dualisms, rather than dualities. Food in itself, and food politics more broadly, is a perfect example of a private/public duality. The food systems are political, from the production, to the intake of food. Embedded in the concept are questions of economic equality – who can afford to eat what - and gender equality – who prepares the meal (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008). Unsurprisingly then, food is often seen as an inherently feminist topic (Hollows 2007; Jovanoski 2015), as women continue to carry the responsibility for the mental and manual labour involved in food provision (Allen and Sachs 2013). Going beyond the domestic sphere, Williams and Counihan (2013) highlight the myriad of ways in which people have been taking food public in recent years, contesting the status quo and promoting creative options.

This thesis explores these issues by characterising how people participate in MamaBake, a big batch cooking group aimed exclusively at mothers. The focus of this research is on everyday people who operate outside formal institutions, as I argue that there is a need to bring the voices of those not normally heard into the political arena. Mothers, as a collective/connective group, are currently under-researched in the field of political

participation. However, this research emphasises that mothers are not a homogenous group, but, rather, use that broad frame to connect with other, similarly situated, actors. It provides insight into a group which is small, but not insignificant, and highlights the ways in which individuals can now find a way to function in a collective setting without having to assume a singular, collective identity.

More broadly, my research builds on existing research on more varied forms of political participation, which go beyond the formal political arena. In doing so, it highlights the similarities and overlap between the theories of political participation and some feminist theories, both of which have recently raised similar concerns about the changing nature of citizens' engagement and the dwindling numbers of people engaging and taking part in in mainstream political activity. In particular, the neoliberal characteristics of modern participation, which celebrate individuality at the expense of collective action, have been flagged in both frameworks (Douglas 2010; McRobbie 2009; Mendes 2012). And, of course, the need for expanding the notion of what is political was articulated in the 1970s in Hanisch's now classic paper, *The Personal is Political,* in which she used the term to refer to broader power relationships, instead of the 'narrow sense of electoral politcs' (Hanisch 1970/2006). However, while feminism is an important aspect of the group, and will be discussed in detail in the last article, it is not the central theme of this research. Rather, the implications of this study relate to broader ways of social organising online and how this relates to the study of the political.

The two central questions; 'What are the key elements of participation in a small, hybrid online/offline group such as MamaBake?', and 'What does this mean in the context of the study of political participation in general?' are explored in the four separate, but interrelated, journal articles, each covering specific aspects of participation in MamaBake:

- The first article focuses on the profile of MamaBakers, using the Everyday Maker framework developed by Henrik Bang (2009). It highlights the ways in which mothers participate in the cooking group, and discusses the implications of these new participatory patterns to the study of political participation. The paper

demonstrates that while participation in MamaBake is personalised, it is simultaneously often done to advance the collective good of the society.

- The second article addresses some of the methodological issues in the study of process politics and groups, given these are not easily measured, by using a coding framework developed by Todd Graham (2008, 2012) to establish whether the discussions on MamaBake's Facebook page have a political dimension. It shows that the social media can foster political talk by creating opportunities for public deliberation for issues of collective interest, a point which is increasingly relevant in the context of 'life politics', and demonstrates the use of personal anecdotes and emotional comments in conjunction with rational debates, challenging the often-evoked binary of rational/emotional.

- The third article investigates the collaborative aspect of the MamaBake group, noting the way in which the group exists in a space outside the traditional market-driven approach and, subsequently, develops a typology of collaborative consumption initiatives. The findings highlight the complexity of the phenomenon, and the benefits they can offer to the participants.

- The final article focuses more specifically on the feminist ideology of the MamaBake group. It explores whether a group which appears to promote the gendered division of domestic labor can simultaneously identify as feminist, and the ways in which the MamaBake participant themselves understand and negotiate feminism. The article shows that a broad approach to ideology, which enables the diversity of groups to flourish, is one of the strengths of modern activism.

The central, unifying theme of the four articles questions the widespread claims of declining political interest and engagement, and provides a more nuanced reading of the situation. I highlight the ways in which mothers are finding new and innovative ways to participate, but since their participation takes place in the private sphere, and the gendered nature impacts the way in which these acts are perceived, they are often left out from the theories of political participation. Overall, this speaks to the attempts to recouple everyday citizens with the political elite by focusing on the ways in which the everyday practices are increasingly relevant to the study of political participation in the digital age.

About MamaBake

Before exploring the methodological issues in studying more varied forms of participation, we first need to establish the central characteristics of the MamaBake group. The group was established in early 2010 by Michelle Shearer in Lennox Head, a small coastal town in New South Wales, Australia. The practice of big batch cooking in a group was initially something she did with her local friends in order to help each other to gain time for things other than domestic chores, and provide practical parenting support in a novel way. As with many other parenting groups, the cooking group also had a closed group page on Facebook (that is, only group members could view and post on the page) where they could connect with each other, and share photos of the sessions among other things. As the word of mouth of the activity spread, and many others expressed their desire to join the group, Shearer recognised the need for a formal page through which information could be shared with a wider audience, and which would aid with the community building. She then devised a simple static website (www.mamabake.com), and created public Facebook page for the group. Initially, the page was run by Shearer along with a fluctuating number of page administrators. She was later joined by a Canberra-based woman, Karen Swan, with whom she has also subsequently published a MamaBake cookbook.

The basic function of MamaBake is to help mothers to form local groups, in which they can share big batch meals, and thus ease their domestic loads. The group has no mandatory memberships and is characterised by decentralised, horizontal organisational structure. Anybody can establish their own group without having any formal engagement with the actual MamaBake page. The online pages act as an information repository, and paid memberships are offered to those wishing to gain full access to all contents on the site such as the full recipe archives. Participation is fluid and convenience-based, and done at the discretion of each individual group. One group, for example can meet weekly at each other's houses to cook together, while others might cook and divide the meals alone, and then meet up at the park for a play date and a meal swap. While the participants have the option of interacting with Shearer and Swan

online, there is no requirement to do so, as in the case with many traditional interest groups. Participation is also often characterised by a strong temporal aspect, with mothers joining in while they are on parental leave and/or working part-time, with the levels of engagement decreasing as they return to the paid work force. Membership in MamaBake, therefore, is necessarily transient and fluid. It is hinged on a particular life phase, which in this case is raising children.

MamaBake's rise can be contextualized as a response to neoliberalism, to combat the perceived problem with the lack of support structures for mothers. While on the surface it appears to promote the gendered division of labor, it also simultaneously highlights the existing inequalities in housework in Australia. As such, the group is not implying that women and mothers are often responsible for the unpaid labor because of their innate qualities, but, rather, arguing that it is because of wider societal structural constraints, which have impacted their ability to make decision about their lifestyles freely. On the other hand, through the posts it makes, MamaBake strongly promotes the idea that women should be able to choose their individual lifestyles without judgment from others. In other words, MamaBake subscribes to the concept of 'choice feminism', which posits that all options, whether stay at home parenting or participating in the paid workforce, are equally valuable. In essence, MamaBake provides a way of working around a known problem, and believes that local communities are vital for a healthy society, but it does not attempt to change the current structural problems at the macro level of society, and as such its impact beyond the level of individual actors is unclear.

Methodology

The study of a group such as MamaBake, which exists both online and offline, has no membership records and lacks clear, measurable aims, by its very nature presents significant methodological issues. What is the dataset when the nature of social media is so fragmented? Does small data matter and can it tell us anything useful about participation, or will it simply turn into a collection of anecdotes with no theoretical relevance? While this research does not conceptualise MamaBake as a social movement

group per se, the insights gained from social movement studies certainly help to address these questions, given MamaBake's similarities to many groups and to social movement activism in general.

As della Porta (2014) notes, methodological pluralism dominates the field of social movement studies, with social movement scholars embodying more nuanced views than the common narratives focusing on positivism versus interpretivism, and their contrasting ontological assumptions about the existence of a 'real world'. Overall, this qualitative research on MamaBake takes on a thin constructivist approach in that it treats concepts such as gender as a site of structured inequality within which power is exercised. That is not to suggest that gender is what people 'are', rather it is what people do (West and Zimmerman 1987), or as Wright and Holland (2014: 457) put it: "Gender is, therefore, a constructed idea and ideal, which emerges from social processes of interaction and which, in turn, help to structure those interactions". It also recognises the importance of the rich data and in-depth individual narratives of the phenomena, especially as they relate to the study of small groups such as MamaBake, and the idea of being open to marginalised voices such as those of mothers, normally absent from the elite discourses. However, as Becker (in della Porta 2014) notes, even such a case study analysis rests on some general laws, and, as such, it is necessary to view structures and perceptions as intimately linked, rather than artificially separating them, and abandoning one to focus solely on the other.

Such a pluralist approach, as della Porta (2014:2-3) notes, has four features, which have strong resonance for this study of MamaBake. First, the lack of reliable databases necessitates the use of a variety of data collection methods. Second, social movement scholars tend to focus on movements with which they are sympathetic, and where they know and share the concerns of those they study. Third, the field is problem, rather than method, oriented, and thus pragmatic in collecting knowledge. As such, in theoretical terms, social movement studies are eclectic and bridge different disciplinary approaches. Finally, the emphasis in social movement studies is on "middle-range theory, rather than the search for grand theory or mere empiricism" (Klandermans et al. in della Porta 2014: 3). While this research recognises that MamaBakers, or mothers in general, are not a homogenous group, and, consequently, don't lend themselves to the

development of all-encompassing generalisable theory, it aims to generate knowledge which goes beyond a simplistic, atheoretical, case study analysis.

As a former member of the MamaBake group, I, as the researcher, had close social links both to my contacts, as well as the topic itself. Such closeness to my topic necessitated continued self-reflexivity to ensure that my own experiences and opinions did not overshadow those of the participants. I achieved this by allowing the narratives to emerge from the data, rather than imposing my views on the topic. For example, my reasons for participating may have been completely different from those of others and thus impacted the way in which I conceptualised the group, and as such, I made sure that I captured some of the ways MamaBakers approached the topic. Yet, this research is underpinned by the recognition that no method or theoretical framework can ever be totally free from the researcher's opinion, as every single act of framing contains a value judgment or omission, whether implicit or explicit, made by the researcher.

The specific data collection methods utilised in this research include in-depth interviews with people who participate in offline, in-person MamaBake groups (as opposed to those who only connect with the group online), and with the founder of the group, an online survey of the MamaBake members, and content analysis of the MamaBake Facebook page. MamaBake has strong offline and online elements, with individual participation including those who only do the real-life cooking without engaging online, those who, for various reasons, only follow the group online, and, of course, members who are both online and offline. The combination of the individual in-depth interviews with the online survey enabled me to gain a better understanding of all these different types of participants. Finally, as attention to online discourse can reveal issues of concern to women and mothers (McCarver 2011), the content analysis of Facebook posts provided information about the online interactions of the participants, and thus the online element was simultaneously a source of information, as well as the object of the study (Mosca 2014).

Having explored the methodological aspects of this research, I will now provide an overview of each of the four articles, which form the main body of this thesis.

MamaBakers as Everyday Makers: The political is personal

In order to understand how and where people participate in an age when memberships cannot be quantified, and people are not committing to an organisation for any particular length of time, there is a need to establish the features of modern participation, and what motivates people to join any particular group. Henrik Bang's classification of Everyday Makers (EMs) offers one of the most important recent contributions to the mainstream political participation literature and provides the language to reconsider the arguments made about the increasing individuality. Bang introduces the EM as a new type of citizen who engages in political participation in late modernity, expresses a project identity and engages in project politics (2009, 2011). This means that EMs are primarily concerned with participating in: 'immediate and prudent action' (Bang 2009). Whether they engage in protests, collaborate in public, private or state and civil society partnerships or volunteer work in their neighbourhoods, EMs repeatedly engage in concrete projects. EMs can be pro-system, anti-system, or both, in different contexts, as this flexibility helps their causes and enables them to pursue their own projects.

For Bang, EMs act in an everyday way, act locally, although they may also think globally and act because it matters to them. They do not feel defined by the state; they are neither apathetic towards it, nor opposed to it. They may be interested in big politics, but do not derive their primary political identity from it. The boundaries between their politics and lifestyle may not be clear, as EMs do not make a distinction between participating to feel engaged and develop oneself and participating for specific causes. Political participation for them is certainly not associated with acquiring influence and success, compared to for example traditional party membership, and they draw a clear line between participating in politics as citizens and as professionals.

Whilst EMs do not usually engage directly with the state in their politics, Bang argues that they are political and are engaged in political processes that are different from those highlighted in the mainstream participation literature. Bang contends that EMs demonstrate the way in which political participation is moving from the input to the

output side of politics and away from a focus on the formal arenas of government towards more direct forms of action. In Bang's view, EMs are concerned with creating political capital, by enhancing political capacities for self-governance and co-governance in, and through, various projects.

One of Bang's key contributions to the political participation literature is his contention that participation today is characterised by project politics and project identities, where individuals engage in specific projects that matter to them and develop appropriate related identities. So, for example, one might participate in a project relating to a local school, before then becoming involved in a national campaign on animal welfare. For Bang, late modernity and the network society is characterised by highly reflexive individuals with fluid identities, which are not shaped by social structures, such as class and gender. Given these characteristics, people can choose which political projects to engage in, and which aspects of their identity to express through those projects. While Bang does not explicitly deny the existence of structured inequality in individuals' lives (see Bang 2011), it certainly seems that he, like much of the recent literature on feminism, underplays its importance, in favour of a focus upon reflexivity and choice (Marsh 2011). Consequently, Marsh argues that the stress on fluid identities in the late modernity literature is 'overdone' (2011), a position emphasised in this thesis.

This paper utilises Bang's Everyday Maker framework to examine whether the concept is applicable in the social setting of MamaBake. It characterises participants in MamaBake and discusses some of the shortcomings of Bang's approach. In doing so, it demonstrates that groups such as MamaBake may be small, but they are not insignificant, and highlights the way in which we should approach participation in an age when people are less inclined to be members for life in a centralised organisation. There has been some research conducted on EMs (Li and Marsh 2008; Marsh, O'Toole and Jones 2007; Blakely and Evans 2009; Hendriks and Tops, 2005), but there is, notably, nothing on women specifically, and this paper addresses this omission.

The everyday politics of parenting: A case study of MamaBake

If we accept the fact that politics and the political can take place in various places outside the formal arenas, it then follows that we must be able to distinguish the political from the social, unless we want to turn the former into a meaningless category. This paper adapts a coding framework originally created for finding political content on traditional social message boards, and uses it to identify political posts on MamaBake's Facebook page. Facebook, as the main platform analysed in this study, presents many methodological problems for such an analysis. The content is in chronological order and gets pushed down whenever the page administrators make a new post, unless the post is 'pinned' at the top of the page. There is also a lot of 'noise' in terms of content, which often appears to be created for content's sake, rather than to further the purpose of the MamaBake group.

In discussing the proto-political sphere online, in which acts traditionally considered as social can develop into action within the political arena (Marsh and Akram 2015), the focus is most often on 'talk'. Here, the immediate question becomes how we can establish whether such talk is political. Based on his research on the online discussion forum for the television show 'The Wife Swap', Graham (2008, 2012) observed that, on many occasions, 'political talk' emerged in these social discussions. Noting the ways in which the social, economic and political changes had brought about the shift to lifestyle politics, he argued that a more flexible approach to political talk is needed in order to capture the "lifestyle-based political issues that arise in online spaces", which had largely been ignored outside formal political forums (Graham 2012: 32). Political talk, he noted, includes everyday conversations carried out freely between participants, which are often spontaneous and "lack purpose outside of talk for talk's sake" (Graham 2012: 32), although such talk can, and does, on occasion lead to action in the formal political arena. Graham's approach marks a shift away from the notion of politics as only involving activities that are trying to influence the formal political sphere, or actively effect change. This resonates with Hay's understanding of politics as a process. However, while Hay (2007: 65) provides one of the most thorough and in-depth accounts of a "differentiated yet inclusive conceptions of politics", his approach lacks a means for systematically analysing the new forms of participation. In contrast, Graham developed a coding scheme for identifying political talk in social forums, which, in conjunction with

Hay's definition, helps to address some of the methodological issues associated with process politics.

Graham (2012: 34) sees posts in which a connection is made "from a particular experience, interest, or issue to society in general", and which "stimulates reflection and a response by at least one other participant" as political threads. However, as his work was based on the Wife Swap discussion forum, which has a different internal logic to that of a Facebook page, some additional criteria were necessary to include visuals, which are an important element of MamaBake's social media posts, and sometimes the main carrier of the message. As such, they needed to be included in the analysis. Similarly, for Graham a 'response' denotes a written posting in a thread. However, MamaBake often encourages people to participate by 'liking' the posts and therefore non-verbal actions such as clicking 'like' were also included in the coding.

The article shows the ways in which the 'political' is a feature of the everyday life and demonstrates one way in which social media, or in this particular case Facebook, can facilitate this interplay between the social, the private and the public and the political. It concludes by emphasising the importance of re-evaluating the distinctions between formal politics and the social sphere, and taking everyday talk into account when exploring the levels of political engagement in society.

Beyond Uber and Airbnb: The social economy of collaborative consumption

Social media has naturally provided the tools for many of the new ways of organising, and, as established in the first two papers, these may provide possibilities for political engagement. However, the theoretical shortcomings in not adequately recognising the possibilities offered by social media go beyond the distinctions between the social and the political, and also extend to our excessive focus on the economic aspects of these new practices. The concept of collaborative consumption is one such area. To date, because collaborative consumption is conceptualised almost exclusively in terms of its market orientation, current theories have failed to recognise the inherent social component of these initiatives. As a consequence, the criticism aimed at the practice has

almost solely also focused on its economic aspects and their subsequent impacts on the health of society. This article explores the ways in which social media has enabled the MamaBake group to utilise the concept of collaborative consumption as a tool for driving their own agenda in a parenting setting. It develops a typology with four broad categories of collaborative consumption, rooted in market, government, advocacy and the social. However, the article focuses upon the least recognised, social level, which is outside any large scale institutions and run by everyday people.

As such, the paper provides a new approach and insights into the study of collaborative consumption, focusing on the underlying connective action logic, which has become increasingly relevant in the age of social media. It shows that values such as communality and helping others are important motivating factors in the social level of the practice, and thus challenges the overly pessimistic accounts of the aggressive individualisation of society. The article concludes by arguing that, while collaborative consumption's separation from the traditional market approaches should not be exaggerated, given the fact that, to a certain extent, MamaBake was created as a response to a wider societal constructs, such as the inadequate support infrastructures for mothers.

You can be a feminist and bake your cake too: Expressions of choice and domesticity online

The final article in this thesis focuses on feminism as the central underlying ideology of the MamaBake group. One of the key issues in relation to the new forms of organising and participation is the lack of clear definitions of concepts. We now know that, although the participants come under the broad banner of 'mothers', they are not homogenous. Their participation patterns are erratic, and their reasons for participating are varied. Furthermore, the multiple and sometimes contradictory definitions of feminism create confusion amongst even those who self-identify as feminists. The case is further complicated by the fact that MamaBake appears to be promoting the idea of gendered labour. Here it is obvious, that the group's lack of clear definitions and the blurred nature of its goals impacts the ways in which others perceive it.

As such, there has been some resistance to the fact that MamaBake calls themselves a feminist movement. It has been accused of perpetuating the idea of mothers as the caregivers, instead of challenging it, and this, some would argue, is not compatible with feminism. MamaBake challenges such notions, arguing that feminism should recognise that all women's family and work choices should be at the individual level, free from structural challenges and the influence of others, a position which has been challenged by some feminist theorists who emphasise the value of paid work.

This article explores the MamaBakers' expressions of choice on a Facebook discussion thread, and examines the ways in which they understand and negotiate domesticity in relation to feminism. It highlights the simplistic and narrow ways in which mothers have been constructed in the mainstream media, and argues that groups such as MamaBake, through the use of internet and social media, fulfill an important function by presenting more complex representations of motherhood. The article argues that, in the age of 'vocal many', when social media enables marginalised groups to voice their opinions, we also need a broader approach to ideology. Thus, instead of a sign of regression, which sees women retreating home in droves, MamaBake should be seen as one of the strengths of modern feminism, allowing people to experience communality, without the need for a cohesive collective movement. In doing so, it highlights the fact that concepts such as feminism are not rigid and in the domain of the elite few, but open to various interpretations, which allows small groups to focus on issues they find important. While the choice literature offers a starting point for such a conceptualisation of feminism, it should always be approached cautiously, given the fact that in our society free (or perhaps better open) choice is a fantasy, and making domestic choices can severely negative impact those who make them. Finally, the article concludes by cautioning against elite-groups representing others, and thus denying the importance of their various causes and alternative participatory repertoires.

Conclusion

The study of politics, with its tendency to focus on formal arenas and quantifiable data, tends to suffer from internal conflict and contradiction. On one hand, many mainstream accounts of the state of political participation acknowledge, along with many feminist theorists, that the modes of participation have changed, with fewer people involved in arena politics. Such accounts often raise concerns about the lack of collective power in the era of fragmentation and individualisation, and lament the impacts it has on healthy democracies. On the other hand, there is a tendency to dismiss smaller, seemingly mundane groups, and in particular those located in the private and social sphere, as insignificant, or at least not influential enough in their own right to alleviate such concerns. However, this small case study of the Australian cooking group MamaBake demonstrates that such groups are increasingly relevant to the theories of political participation. As the nature of citizens' engagement keeps evolving, we simply cannot afford to ignore the voices and views of minorities just because they are, by their very nature, small and don't lend themselves to big quantitative data analysis. Instead, we need to focus on methodological pluralism to find new and innovative ways of capturing such data, which may present itself in platforms and groups previously excluded from the study of political participation. That is of course not to say that the new forms are completely replacing the conventional repertoires, but, rather, they exist alongside, opening up new possibilities and new articulations of political engagement. The focus of this thesis will be on examining how such an approach can be used to reveal the political dimension of a group located in the social sphere, and it will demonstrate the relevance of this to the wider participation literature.

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MamaBakers as Everyday Makers: The political is personal

Abstract

Henrik Bang's concept of the Everyday Maker as a new type of political identity has been increasingly utilised in empirical research across a wide range of settings. In an age with numerous accounts of the changing nature of political participation, Bang's framework enables a critical investigation of contemporary participation. Although one of the key defining characteristics of the Everyday Maker is that their activity often occurs outside the formal political sphere, there is no empirical work to date which uses Bang's frame to examine gendered activities which appear private and social, with no obvious connections to the 'political'. To address this omission, this article explores women's participation in an Australian community group, MamaBake using the Everyday Maker framework to provide an alternative reading of what might be termed personalised politics. The article argues that the new type of political identity, is also prevalent in the social context, and demonstrates why this is relevant to the study of political participation. It also challenges the idea that the new forms are increasingly characterised by 'engagement norms'. The data for the case study research is drawn from a survey of the MamaBake members, and interviews with the real life participants.

Keywords: Political participation, citizenship norms, individualisation, MamaBake, Australia

MamaBakers as Everyday Makers: The political is personal

Introduction

Accounts of the decline in conventional political participation have dominated the field of Political Science for a significant period, leading to an apparent consensus about the problems facing democracy (Dalton 2008). In part, this assessment results from the restricted understanding of 'the political' in the mainstream literature, where the focus is upon activities clearly in the political arena, such as voting, party and interest group membership and attending demonstrations (Marsh et al. 2007). There is little doubt that most of these forms of participation have declined in most liberal democracies (Dalton 2008; Putnam 2000, Stoker 2006). However, at the same time, there has been a surge in protest activity recently in both the virtual and the real world, ranging from Occupy (Boler et al. 2014) to Anonymous (Halupka 2013). This development is increasingly emphasised by the mainstream literature and Norris particularly (2002, 2011) has moved the debate forward by identifying the new agencies, tactics and targets involved in contemporary political participation. But, this literature still focuses on political participation within an easily recognisable, if expanded, political arena.

At the same time, as the introduction to this volume emphasises, there is increasing evidence that people are finding novel ways of 'political' engagement outside the formal arena of politics, both online and offline (Hay 2007; Norris 2002, 2011; Bang 2009; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). In other words, while the traditional ways of organising and connecting with the political sphere, for example through party membership, have declined, there is ample empirical evidence to demonstrate a rise in alternative forms of 'political' participation. The emergence of web 2.0 is a significant factor here, since it has enabled interactive communication and organisation through various different platforms. As such, there are now many movements which operate both online and offline. These hybrid movements, as identified by Castells (2012), often embody participatory cultures and are characterised by low barriers to participation, strong support for sharing, the presence of informal mentorship, a general sense among

members that their contribution matters and a concern and care for the participation of others (Boler et al. 2014).

Much of the literature discussed in the previous paragraph, for example the important work by Norris, represents a development of the mainstream work. However, Bang goes further, arguing that people are increasingly involved in action which is not directly political; so individuals don't directly engage in the political arena, but their action has clear political resonance. Bang's work is particularly interesting because he identifies a new form of political participant, the Everyday Maker, who has emerged in the context of the increased complexity and increased reflexivity in the contemporary period, which many have identified as 'late modernity' (on this aspect of Bang's argument see Marsh, 2011). The Everyday Maker is a concept which many authors have found useful because it addresses the key issue in modern political participation research: the simultaneous significant decline in mainstream forms of political participation and the rise in alternative forms.

In this article I use Bang's Everyday Maker framework to frame a case study of MamaBake, an Australian women's group, which is a good example of a contemporary group in which participants exhibit new forms of participation which doesn't have a clear 'political' dimension. At the same time, I also briefly discuss the overlap between Bang's approach and some of the feminist work on contemporary political engagement, an important issue given my case study is of a feminist group. In a crucial sense, Bang reverses a key mantra of feminism, 'the personal is political', arguing instead that the political is increasingly personal, although, like Harris, whose work is briefly considered below, Bang would accept that both mantras have resonance in contemporary politics.

My aim in this article then is to assess the extent to which Bang's framework can be applied to MamaBake and, by doing so, to explore further the nature of contemporary political participation. The article is divided into three substantive parts. The first section outlines Bang's approach, focusing particularly on his concept of Everyday Makers. I also examine the commonalities between Bang's argument and Anita Harris' (2001) feminist-inspired work on new types of participation. The second section then critically evaluates the MamaBake movement against the Everyday Maker framework.

Finally, the last section outlines some issues with Bang's theory, arguing that, while the new forms of political participation are distinct from the more conventional forms, these differences should not be exaggerated.

Bang to rights

Developing the mainstream view

Of course, Bang is not the only author to point to the increased personalisation of contemporary politics (Putnam 2000; Boggs 2000: 91; Macedo and Alex-Assessoh 2005). For many, falling political participation results from the growth of individualism and the decline of collectivism, largely because of the growth of neo-liberalism (Putnam 2000; Bellah 1985; Lane 2000), with self-interested, free-riding citizens enjoying the benefits provided by the state, but not contributing to it. This diagnosis isn't new and a number of terms have been coined to characterise this type of politics; Inglehart (1997) terms it 'postmodern politics', Giddens (1991) 'life politics' and Bennett (1998) 'lifestyle politics'. However, all these authors suggest that citizens increasingly make political choices based upon how those choices affect their own lifestyles (Bennett 2004). As such, these choices are rarely underpinned by a commitment to either an ideological position or to a traditional institution, such as a political party. The problem, as identified by many theorists (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Marsh et al. 2007) is that citizens increasingly feel they lack the power or influence to solve policy problems impacting their everyday lives.

More broadly, it is argued that these new ways of organising reflect the increased importance of engagement norms, rather than duty norms (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Dalton 2008; Norris 1999, 2011; Bang 2009). So, people are participating because they want to, rather than doing it out of obligation to fulfill the requirements of good citizenship. Many theorists have echoed the changing citizenship concepts, indicating a growing consensus that young people in particular have engagement norms rather than traditional duty norms (see for example Dalton 2008; Flanagan 2013; Norris 2011). While there are several different terms to describe the phenomenon – Dalton (2008)

termed them 'engaged', Norris (2011) 'critical', and Bennett and Segerberg (2013) 'self-actualizing' - they all point towards the changing nature of citizenship. It is also worth emphasising here that there is evidence that this trend, from duty norms to engagement norms is not consistently observed across countries (Hooghe and Oser 2015).

This brief discussion illustrates again that the mainstream literature has evolved, but, while Bang concurs with some of its points, particularly the decline of the importance of ideology or party as an organising principle for citizens' political participation and the decline in the importance of duty norms, he thinks that the issue is more fundamental because it represents a 'decoupling' between authorities and government which will be very difficult to address.

An alternative reading of personalised politics – The Everyday Makers

In discussing the 'black hole in the mainstream's underlying liberal democratic model', Bang (2009: 18) has criticised its approach to participation, extensively based on Almond and Verba's (1963) *Civic Culture*, for always viewing people in terms of how they orient themselves to government from outside in civil society, either as active and virtuous citizens or passive and obedient subjects. Taking a significant step away from the theories which see global market forces as the culprit, transforming citizens into self-interested consumers, who exploit the state in order to improve their own personal lives, Bang (2004: 3) argues that, while reflexive individuals shun conventional 'big politics', they can be mobilised to build political communities. In doing so, they 'express their individuality in cooperation with others, for the explicit purpose of making a difference in the solving of common concerns'; acting as Everyday Makers.

The 'Everyday Maker' is a new type of political participant who does not actively engage in formal political processes, but is more project-oriented and invents a variety of: 'small everyday tactics to make a political difference as an 'ordinary' political citizen' (Bang and Sorensen, 2001). For Bang (2009), the political communities are composed of reflexive individuals and groups who celebrate difference, which allows them to focus on the projects that they deem important. So, he is emphasising, like others, that

individuals' political identities are no longer rooted in party membership or ideologies, but are increasingly project identities. The big difference for Bang, is the fact that the project identity does not necessitate the creation or adoption of either an *oppositional* or a *legitimating* identity. So, the Everyday Makers neither believe in participating in order to keep the system legitimate, nor do they act because they are opposed to it. Rather, they simply act because they believe their cause is worthy and contributes to the greater good, whether this act involves creating or revising policies, or occurs completely outside formal politics.

For Bang, 'Everyday Makers' have seven mantras to which they adhere:

1. Do it yourself. 2. Do it where you are. 3. Do it for fun, but also because you find it necessary. 4. Do it ad hoc or part-time. 5. Do it concretely, instead of ideologically. 6. Do it with self-confidence and show trust in yourself. 7. Do it with the system, if need be.

Of course, the Everyday Maker, defined in this way, seems to be of particular relevance for community organisations operating outside the formal political arena. While often politically aware and likely to vote, the Everyday Makers do not like getting involved with the state, but instead act at a local-level. Rather than participating because they are bound by a sense of duty, they do it for self-development; they have engagement norms rather than duty norms (see also Dalton 2008). Everyday Makers are neither apathetic, nor opposed to the state, and they do not participate in projects in order to acquire influence or success. They see institutions and networks as features of everyday life, rather than as properties of government. In other words, their approach marks a shift away from state-centric politics, as individuals engage in projects that they feel are important to them, and Bang (2010) argues that these projects and processes are political.

Finding Everyday Makers

Before turning to my case study, I want to briefly consider previous empirical work using the Everyday Makers frame, partly to show that Bang's ideas have been shown to have resonance in relation to contemporary political participation, and partly to emphasise the absence of any real consideration of gender in these studies.

The Everyday Maker framework, developed by Bang (2009) in the context of research on political participation in Copenhagen, Denmark, has been utilised in a number of empirical studies, all of which found the concept useful, although most studies have suggested ways in which it could be developed. Here, I focus on a few examples of this work. Most of research has focused on the changing patterns of political participation and has utilised qualitative methods.

A typical example here is Marsh et al.'s (2007) study of young peoples' conception of the 'political' in Birmingham, UK. They identified Everyday Makers among their respondents, but, unlike Bang, focused upon how their young respondents 'lived experience' was structured by class, gender and ethnicity. Marsh was also involved in the only large scale quantitative analysis to date of Everyday Makers (Li and Marsh, 2008). They used data from the 2001 UK Home Office Citizenship survey, and found evidence of Everyday Makers. Overall, they argue that Everyday Makers are a feature of contemporary political participation, but suggest that they are one amongst four different types of political participant and argue that it needs to be recognised that some people are non-participants regardless of the political participation we are considering.

Some literature which uses the concept focuses on the disconnect between Everyday Makers and government. Collin (2008) examined the relationship between youth participation policies, the internet and young people's political identities. She noted that Bang's framework was particularly useful "because it challenges the political/civil society dichotomy prevalent in discourses of 'active citizenship'" (Collin, 2008: 531). In interviewing young people involved in an Australian non government organisation, the Inspire Foundation, she found that most respondents adopted an Everyday Maker approach (2008). She also noted that Bang's conceptualisations of the Everyday Makers

and Expert Citizens helped explain what mobilises project-oriented identities beyond the state. Similarly, Vromen and Collin (2010) also found evidence of Bang's political identities in their research on youth participation in the policymaking process. Their research found that, while policymakers recognised the value of creating space for Everyday Maker political identities, there was still an emphasis on the Expert Citizen role, which often resulted in the exclusion of young people from marginalised backgrounds.

Seabrooke (2011) discusses the concept in relation to the political challenge resulting from intergenerational conflict at the everyday and advocacy levels, where the younger are more likely to embody the characteristics of the Everyday Makers, but these issues will be 'off radar' in analyses of formal politics and off the agenda for the political authorities. Bochel et al. (2008: 206) in turn take a more pessimistic approach to new forms of participation and highlight the risks in increasing direct participation by Everyday Makers, who they see, wrongly in my view, as people acting as atomised consumers who fragment and trivialise the public sphere, or whose participation can be "orchestrated by policy makers for their own purposes". In Bochel et al.'s view, we need to develop appropriate mechanisms to ensure effective direct participation, but they argue that, so far, the political system has not managed to create a group or a platform to facilitate this process.

This brief review of some extant uses of Bang's Everyday maker's framework shows that many researchers have found it useful, but it also indicates that there is no real consideration of the relationship between Everyday Making and gender. This does not mean that there have been no interesting contributions to the field of women's activism in contemporary movements in recent years. For example, Boler et al. (2014) examine women's roles in the leaderless Occupy movement[2]. Extending Bennett and Segerberg's connective action logic (2013), they argue that there is an emerging notion of 'connective labour', where the labour of women, which is often invisible in the online environment, both supports and sustains the overall movement. However, their focus is

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As Boler et al. (2014: 439) so aptly note: "It is difficult to miss the irony that at a time when women are increasingly adopting distinctive and potent leadership roles within contemporary social movement organizational structures, a commitment to horizontalism and an ethos of leaderless movement renders any identification of leaders unwelcome."

upon women's roles in a non-gender specific movement, whereas I will focus on a group run by women for women. Such groups and movements tend to be investigated through the lens of feminism, and I briefly examine that literature and its synergies with Bang's framework in the next section.

The synergies between Bang's Everyday Makers and feminism

Before I look at these synergies, it is important to emphasise that the mainstream literature on political participation treats gender as an important variable. Women are usually characterised as being less politically engaged than men, although they are now better represented in national Parliament and hold more executive positions than ever before (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010). In contrast, one of the key foci of the feminist literature is on the importance of the differences between feminist and mainstream organisations. The key point here is that the new forms of participation that Bang and others identify have similar organisational characteristics; in particular they are open, non-hierarchical and fluid.

Certainly, Bang would agree with feminist scholars that the private/public dualism is a false one and so would acknowledge that 'the personal is political', as famously articulated by Hanich (1970) more than four decades ago. However, while the resonance between the slogan's feminist origins and Bang's work is obvious, the main difference is that Bang sees development as crossing gender, although the forms it takes may be gendered (Bang 2009). In addition, and crucially, as already indicated, Bang also wants to reverse the mantra, arguing that the 'political is personal'; indeed that is almost an article of faith for Everyday Makers.

It needs to be acknowledged that many feminist work would acknowledge that the political is, or can be personal; without of course denying the reverse. In particular, there are obvious synergies between Bang's Everyday Makers and Harris' 'uncategorised young feminism', although neither explicitly references the other. Harris (2001) argues that, rather than young women being apathetic or disinterested, the problem lies with the definitions of feminism. In her view, we need to look beyond the

sites traditionally considered as legitimate arenas of resistance and consciousness-raising, because she contends that the places enabling the expression are just as important as what women have to say (Harris 2001). She suggests three features of activism that are currently largely overlooked, because such action can't be neatly packaged:

1.   It is diverse, multiple, and open to a range of viewpoints;
2.   It uses technology, popular culture and the media in savvy ways;
3.   It is 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) rather than leader-focused.

Crucially, Harris (2001) argues that, while the DIY approach has been criticised for involving 'selfish individualism and greed', it is, instead, about: 'taking charge and making difference in the context of creating real change'. The resonance with the Everyday Maker framework here is clear.

Having outlined Bang's Everyday Makers concept, as well as briefly examining its relationship to the feminist approach and particular the work of Harris, I will now turn to my case study of MamaBake.

Who are the MamaBakers?

The origins of the MamaBake group

Disenchanted by the lack of support structures available for mothers, Michelle Shearer, a woman and a mother herself, from a small coastal town Lennox Head, in NSW Australia, founded the MamaBake group in early 2010 to address the fact that women are still carrying most of the domestic burden. What started off as a group of friends getting together to cook their meals in order to ease their workloads, soon rapidly grew into an international online movement facilitated by the social media technologies. MamaBake started off as a Facebook group, as well as a simple static website, but has since adopted several other communication channels, including Pinterest, Instagram and Twitter. The core idea behind the movement is simple: Mothers get together to cook big batch meals

which are then shared amongst the participants, hence enabling Mothers to "reclaim their own time and access nurturing support for one another through group, big batch dinner cooking" (MamaBake, Facebook, accessed January 2014). As such, MamaBake offers a fascinating snapshot of a group characterised by hybrid online and offline elements. The focus of the MamaBaking action itself is on the small scale, real-life, support groups, but the movement's online presence is of equal importance, since it is the web presence which continues to draw people's attention and enables the growth of the movement outside its physical origins.

Methods

To gain an insight into the MamaBake movement, several data collection methods were utilised. Initially, I conducted participant observation on the movement's online sites, to gain an insight into the information posted online. As a former member of the MamaBake group, I have been following the group since its inception in a personal capacity, and was thus already familiar with many of its practices. The nature of this data gathering method raises questions regarding informed consent and, as noted by Seale et al. (2010), opinion regarding the ethics of using such material is still divided. This question is particularly pertinent to Facebook data, where people post under their names and are not de-identified by self-selected usernames, or anonymous posting. However, as Seale et al. (2010) point out, this data is in the public domain and, as such, informed consent for research purposes is not required. The data on Facebook can be accessed by anyone and it is not limited to those with an active Facebook account. In addition, not all Facebook users can be contacted via private messaging since each user determines their own account settings. If any comments from the online forums are used for the purposes of this project, all personal identifiers are removed as per the ethics guidelines for the interview data.

This information collected online was used to inform the development of the interview guides. I conducted seven in-depth individual interviews with women who had participated in the real life, MamaBake cooking groups in Canberra Australia. The interview participants who were involved in the real life MamaBaking were aged

between 22 and 37 and participated in three separate groups in Canberra. The interview themes focused on participants' involvement with MamaBake, their motivations for participating, and their opinions on the activity. The interviews also investigated their involvement in other organisations and their political activity in the formal political arena. All but one of the interviewees had children under school age at the time of the interviews,

The interviews were complemented with an online survey, which together facilitated a deeper understanding of both the offline and the online participants, and what motivates people to participate in either or both. Given the hybrid nature of the MamaBake group, it was deemed particularly important to hear from both the online followers and the real life MamaBakers. The MamaBake administrators were approached and they were asked to post a link to the survey on their Facebook site in March 2015. The link was also tweeted at the time of the Facebook posting. The survey drew 40 responses. Given the Facebook's algorithm, which significantly limits the reach of any given post (only people who regularly interact with Facebook sites through either 'liking' or 'commenting' will see most of the posts in their Newsfeed), this was considered a successful response. The survey advertisement identified the researcher as a member of the MamaBake community, thus explicitly noting my position as one of the group being studied. The survey consisted of 26 closed and open-ended questions. The questions focused on the respondents' opinions and experiences with MamaBake, how they found out about the movement, their online/offline behaviour and their overall satisfaction with their lives. There were also basic demographic questions to establish their current family and work arrangements. Of the survey respondents, 61% were between 30 and 39 years old, 25% between 40 and 49, and 8% between 21and 29 years old. The vast majority of the respondents' families included under school aged children. 92% resided in Australia, with only one each in Norway, the UK and New Zealand. 33% were employed on a part-time basis, while 16% were at full-time work and 16% were at home full time. Of the 40 respondents, 26 had also participated in a real life MamaBake session.

Motherhood Everyday Makers – Do they exist?

In this section, I analyse the data obtained through the survey and the interviews in order to establish whether I can identify Everyday Makers in a hybrid women's movement like MamaBake. Of the 40 survey respondents, 39 accessed social media daily. 17 reported the online presence and the real life MamaBake activities as being of equal importance, while 13 noted the online presence being more important and nine valued the real life MamaBake groups the most. Given the fact that a link to the survey was posted on Facebook, it is hardly surprising that 38 followed MamaBake on Facebook, although seven also followed the group on Instagram and Pinterest. None of the respondents followed the Twitter feed. Again perhaps unsurprisingly, 22 of the respondents had heard of MamaBake through Facebook, while 12 reported 'word of mouth' and two each through print media and email. 26 of all respondents had participated in a real life MamaBake session as well. Almost half reported MamaBaking sporadically, while four respondents MamaBaked fortnightly or monthly.

The respondents were first asked to describe in their own words what MamaBake means to them. An open-ended question was chosen to capture the multiple ways women can view the group, as it was recognised that my views, as the researcher, might not reflect those of the other MamaBakers. The answers were coded based on the frequently occurring themes and six different categories of response were identified: community; food; support; free time; fun, and the online forum. Responses which reflected more than one category were placed under all relevant themes, so a particular response could simultaneously be in more than one category. 'Food' and 'community' were the most commonly mentioned themes, with 25 and 27 responses recorded respectively. 'Support' was mentioned 11 times, 'fun' nine times, 'free time' eight times and 'the online forum' twice.

Similar results were obtained from the multiple-choice question, which asked: 'Why do you MamaBake?' Here, 15 noted that they did it because they wanted 'to build a community of like-minded parents', with the same number selecting 'I don't have to cook dinner every night'. Almost as popular at 13 were 'because it's enjoyable', 'to do

something productive with my friends' and 'I love cooking'. However, when asked about the most important aspect of a real life MamaBake session, 'friendship' and 'community building' were the most significant factors at 10 and six responses respectively, while food was the most important aspect for only four respondents. 17 reported having had some challenges while MamaBaking. These were most often related to the logistics: finding time that suits everyone's schedules, catering for various dietary requirements or inequity in meals, that is, people feeling like they put more effort into their meals than others, or underestimating the amount needed for several families.

Interestingly, the majority (29) reported already having a sense of community where they live and 27 were also active in community organisations other than MamaBake. 23 of the respondents did most of the cooking in their household, while nine said that they shared cooking duties equally with their partner. Similar patterns were also noted in child-care arrangements, with 23 being the primary care-givers and nine sharing equally with their partners. Most respondents also reported being either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their current housework arrangements. In terms of the work and child care arrangements, 14 would like to stay at home part-time and work part-time, while 13 reported being happy with their current arrangement. Similarly, 26 indicated being happy with their current work/life balance. For those who indicated not being totally satisfied, they indicated reasons such as 'having to work for financial reasons', the 'high cost of childcare', or either their own or their partners' work not being flexible.

Having reported some of the main findings from the survey and the interviews, I will now consider the data in the context of the Everyday Maker framework.

1.   Do it yourself.

When discussing the DIY element of the MamaBake group, it is important to distinguish between the founder of the movement and the actual participants. The founder is definitely exhibiting this characteristic of the Everyday Maker, since, instead of lobbying for more formal support for mothers, she started a grassroots movement and believes in her ability to provide a structure that enables the distribution of that support for mothers. However, the issue is more complicated when one analyses the participants'

motivations for joining the movement. With 'friendship' as the most important aspect of the movement to 10 respondents, as opposed to 'community building' (6) and 'food' for only four, the DIY element is less clear. While friendship and community building are certainly interrelated, it still problematises the idea that people participate because they are trying to achieve something at the macro level of society, beyond improving their own personal circumstances. Marsh and Vromen (2011: 14) similarly observe that there are different types of Everyday Makers, and while all have different characteristics from those involved in more formal political participation, they do not all share the same characteristics.

2.   <u>Do it where you are</u>

By using social media such as Facebook, MamaBake can reach people across geographical boundaries, but its main aim is to help people connect with others within their own area. Instead of trying to change society and/or policy at a national level, the participants are actively involved in the process of creating their own local communities. To make this easier, some cities and towns in Australia have their own subgroups on Facebook, where people can find others interested in MamaBaking and organise MamaBake sessions. MamaBake also provides people with ideas on how to find and form their own groups.

Here, however, the online element adds an interesting dimension, as it can create a sense of community, even when there are limited, or no, physical communities available. In this vein, the fact that a significant number of survey respondents found the online presence to be either as important, or more important, than real life MamaBaking sessions is telling. Talking about the physical isolation, one respondent also noted the way in which MamaBake allows people to work towards a common cause, while recognising the individuals' differences:

> Coming from an Outback childhood, I value any type of communication with like-minded people, and also those who I would not usually meet and chat with

normally. Sites like Mamabake fill a gap for those of us who are isolated, for whatever reason – physically, geographically, due to circumstances.

However, one interviewee also noted that she found the online content 'annoying' and had to re-evaluate its benefits to herself as she found that, instead of saving time, being online was taking up some of her time, which ironically is one of the key issues MamaBake is trying to address. Here again, the most notable factor is the way in which the two different facets of MamaBake – the online and the offline - provide avenues for multiple expressions of identity and building commonality. The different needs and abilities of the participants influence the way in which they interact with the movement, but the main point is that they have the freedom and power to choose their preferred aspects, instead of having the structure mandated from above. However, as the above quote regarding isolation highlights, the choice is not always a 'real' choice for the individual, but rather is imposed on them by the prevailing circumstances.

3.   Do it for fun, but also because you find it necessary

The 'fun' elements of the activity were evident in the survey responses, with explicit references to fun made in response to the question: 'What does MamaBake mean to you?' One respondent emphasised: 'Way more fun than mothers groups where you just sit and chat and find you have little in common. Cooking created the commonalities and built bonds.' Another MamaBaker also used similar terms and noted that for her, MamaBake meant 'Fun times with friends, with the end result of having meals in my freezer, less stress and more time with my family overall.'

In contrast, while many of the interviewees participated in MamaBake because they enjoyed it, they also acknowledged its broader purpose. The desire to create and be part of local communities was often cited as the reason to join the MamaBake movement: 'More than anything I love the idea of women coming together in a community to work together and support each other. The whole MamaBake idea is a formal movement of what I wish society was still naturally like.' This, in essence, demonstrates the participant's wish to see change in society, but, rather than going through political processes, she employs alternative methods and engages with the community directly.

Other respondents mentioned that they wished to create friendships and larger networks of like-minded people through MamaBake. The survey data also echoed these findings, with emphasis often on the need for a community of like-minded women.

However, while one interview respondent recognised the need to alleviate the burden of domestic work for mothers, she also challenged the notion of MamaBake achieving any greater societal change: 'I think maybe… maybe [MamaBake] just helps women to survive society as it currently is, rather than changing society. I think if you could get more men to share more of the domestic burden, that would be a significant change to the society.' When probed about the possibility of MamaBake highlighting the current structural inequalities, she continued: 'I think it does encourage people to talk about the domestic burden.' However, she also noted that this was not unproblematic: 'I guess the risk is that instead of inviting people to think about what they can do to reduce the domestic burden, it fetishises the domestic burden.'

4. <u>Do it ad hoc or part-time.</u>

The participation in MamaBake is casual in nature, with very few rules. For those who want to officially join the movement, MamaBake offers an opportunity to do so, but it does not obligate people to do anything. Members receive the MamaBake Newsletter, five free big batch recipes and a 'Kick Off Guide', to help them to establish their own MamaBake groups. Joining is free and participants have no formal commitments to either the founder of the movement or any possible subgroups. MamaBake makes several Facebook posts every day on a variety of topics and encourages people to participate in these discussions. For those wanting to participate, the one guiding principle for posting their views is the MamaBake's slogan 'Curiosity Without Judgment'; that is, everyone is free to express their opinion, but personal attacks on other people are not tolerated

For the participants there was a strong temporal aspect to actually MamaBaking, with many reporting that they stopped once they went back to work after maternity leave. Others noted that the 'kids are older now and most Mums are working, so we usually manage a session every holiday'. For that particular reason, it is impossible to establish

how many active MamaBake groups there are at any given moment, since the groups are nebulous and some have very little engagement with the official page online.

Another defining feature of the Everyday Makers is that they participate when they can 'fit it into all one's exciting projects of studying, traveling, becoming a parent, etc.' (Bang 2004: 19). This feature was clearly demonstrated in one response: 'I'm actively ignorant of formal politics. I have no room for the stress that comes with watching TV news or reading newspapers.' The fact that all of the women interviewed for the study have young children (with all but one under school age at the time), and are, by their own definition, pressed for time to themselves, also contributes to the overall lack of commitment in formal, big politics.

5.   Do it concretely, instead of ideologically

In response to the question of what MamaBake means to the survey respondents, food was mentioned 27 times. Some discussed the food in concrete terms: 'Great resource for recipes and family food ideas'; and 'A way to get a bulk lot of cooking done in advance.' Others focused on the immaterial benefits gained from the activity: 'It means time spent with friends and building a community with the added benefit of big batch cooking saving sanity at dinner times with little ones'; and 'MamaBake was a great opportunity to connect to friends and share in the cooking of meals…lots of laughs, children safe and happy to play together'.

However, this mantra is probably one of the most problematic aspects of the Everyday Maker framework. The big-batch cooking, while an important element of the movement, and often the aspect that initially attracts women to join, is also a vehicle for building the connection between mothers. It offers the participants a concrete method for enhancing their social circumstances. For one participant, the food itself was an important factor: 'I went along [to a MamaBake session] and had this great morning, and I came home with this beautiful food that I hadn't cooked. I like trying new foods that someone else has cooked.' However, the feminist connotations of the movement can't be ignored in that it

attempts to make what is traditionally private mothers' work public, and, in doing so, highlights the structured inequalities of the current system in Australia. Herein lies the bigger problem: if one defines an activity as inherently feminist, is it possible to define it as non-ideological at the same time? Similarly, both the survey respondents and the interview participants extensively emphasise the value of community and, either indirectly or directly, evoked the old adage 'it takes a village to raise a child', emphasising that they felt they were achieving this in part because of MamaBake. As such, their reasons for joining are highly ideological. The concrete aspect of the cooking food together is just the 'tool', which brings these women together, but the real focus is on the sense of community the involvement brings.

6.   Do it with self-confidence and show trust in yourself

For Bang, one of the key aspects of new forms of political participation is that the participants can adopt different project-related identities, depending on their own individual situations, which of course may change. The Everyday Makers consider the political realm as part of their own identity (Bang 2004: 18). These identities can, in turn, have an impact on how people view the movement and its goals and what they are looking for when they take part in the movement, whether in the online environment or in the actual MamaBake cooking sessions. One of the interviewees identified strongly with stay-at-home mothers and she noted that MamaBake provided: 'validation that staying at home is work and that it can be hard.' She also further acknowledged that, for her, the movement offered: 'honesty in motherhood. MamaBake acknowledges that it is important for mothers to have time and space to nourish their souls, and by the act of sharing food you can achieve it.'

7.   Do it with the system, if need be.

The interview responses exhibited a wide range of variation regarding both formal and informal political participation. Three of the seven people interviewed expressed interest in, and were involved in, formal politics, although only one was actively

participating at the moment. One of them cited maternity-leave as a reason for her current inactivity: 'I definitely have an interest, but not a lot of involvement at the moment. I was, and I guess still do, working for a large national feminist advocacy organisation and often met with politicians about issues affecting women'.

For others, the reasons for not participating were varied. One mother argued: 'I'm not actively participating in formal politics. We have a pretty decent political situation and I'm not negatively affected by any of it, so I don't feel the need to participate. There are people around me who [actively participate], so I don't have to.' This idea that individuals participate when it suits them reflects the position of Everyday Makers, who participate when they feel inclined to do so, instead of committing to it 'for life'. However, this response is illuminating, as it demonstrates that, while most participants mentioned they wanted to create and participate in a local community, they didn't view it as directly linked to formal politics along the lines of the neoliberal arguments, but rather something they themselves can address at the grassroots level. More broadly, they viewed community building in terms of building social, rather than political capital.

Discussion: The political is personal

What has emerged so far is that MamaBakers are unique individuals, who can participate when they feel inclined to do so, with their participation taking many different forms, depending on their personal circumstances. But, the question that is still unanswered is what exactly is MamaBake? It's not a representation group for mothers with a legitimate identity, neither does it embody an oppositional identity the same way as movements such as Occupy do. Rather, it simply provides either access to a community, or concrete tools for building that community in places where it may not exist. The important part is not, however, what it is, but what it represents. Through MamaBake we can learn about the way in which multiple, often contradictory, identities can be brought together to address common concerns, in this instance the myriad issues related to parenting. The individuals are empowered to take charge of their own lives, and they have what Bang would term 'project identities'. The question here is not whether MamaBake can create real, societal change, but rather how they operate, as this

may impact the way in which the 'big' politics will interact with the society which is increasingly distancing itself from the more formal modes of participation.

The Everyday Maker framework also contains problematic elements, which require further investigation: most notably the way in which many modern theories privilege the concept of engagement norms and regard it as the preferred way of participation in contemporary societies. This discussion is particularly pertinent to a group such as MamaBake, which is based around parental duties, and reflects the fact that women are still doing most of the housework in Australia, regardless of their employment status. The fact that only one interview respondent disagreed with the view that MamaBake operates solely in the realm of women indicates that, at least at some level, the normative aspects of gendered parental duties are still quietly accepted. The fact that the majority of the women were happy with their work/life balance, despite also being the main caregivers, and doing the bulk of the housework, would also attest to that.

However, regardless of any possible gender differences, while the way in which people interact with the political sphere may have changed, it would be foolish to suggest that there has been a wholesale abandonment of duty norms, and the data from this study would suggest the opposite. The MamaBake respondents feel that they have the duty to look after their families, and they build communities and local networks because they feel that is the optimal society to live in. While they talked about the 'fun' aspects of MamaBaking, they were always in conjunction with the expressions of community and providing for their families. In other words, while the respondents' participation takes on 'fun' forms, it is strongly driven by the sense of duty. For the respondents, they saw themselves as creating a better society, whether or not it will have actual real life impact beyond the individual level. Here, the resonance between the MamaBakers and both Bang's Everyday Maker and Harris' uncategorised feminism is obvious. While there is of course a strong element of improving the individual families' circumstances, and thus operating around the personalised forms of participating, it was not done for personal gains per se. That is, there was no indication that the participants expected it to give them an edge or to become more successful in their lives, rather, it was solely a method for improving their lived experiences through acts which can't be measured: the acts of being a good neighbour and helping out fellow mothers, while also helping themselves.

This leaves us with the most important question: Why does this matter? The first obvious answer to this question relates back to the concept of gender. If there are indeed observable differences in how people participate, can we afford to ignore those new or different forms? If we leave out forms of 'political' participation, which do not conform to traditionally notions of 'politics', then this will influence the way in which we study political participation. This, in turn, will not only constrain our understanding of the state of democracy, but also hinder, even disable, our ability to recouple citizens, both women and men, to a set of political authorities from whom they are becoming' decoupled'.

The MamaBakers are active participants, not only in the MamaBake groups, or in its online community, but also in many other community organisations. While some of them may not be participating in formal politics, and in that sense they are indeed the Everyday Makers who participate when it suits them, taking part in projects they deem important, they have not isolated themselves from the wider society, nor do they simply forward their own interests. This of course leaves us with the biggest question of all: how do we bring the 'big' politics and the grassroots activism closer together? This is a question, which is far beyond the scope of this case study. However, the first step in such a 'recoupling' is to acknowledge the multiple ways in which citizens' operate in the society. It is crucial that we don't ignore these because of the obvious difficulties involved in quantifying such activity. In addition, it is time that we stop referring to these new practices as 'alternative,' because doing so marginalises such activity, which is becoming increasingly important. Our focus needs to be on what is taking place, instead of what is not. The traditional forms of participation have not been replaced by a vacuum or widespread apathy, but by a society in which people are increasingly taking charge of own lives, and MamaBake is but one example of such activity. It allows participants the immediacy of feeling engaged, and being part of the process, which enables them to be active agents in their own communities, something the formal politics has struggled to achieve.

Conclusion

Political participation is certainly changing. However, while people are increasingly finding more personalised ways to engage in their communities, as evidenced by the MamaBakers, the dominant diagnosis of the perils of such activity are exaggerated and even misguided. Indeed, the evidence from this small study suggests that, while much of the MamaBakers activism takes personalised forms, it is not done for personal gains per se. Rather, it demonstrates Bang's argument that reflexive individuals can be mobilised to form communities around ideas and topics they deem important, instead of having to commit to an institution or ideology for life. These new forms of political participation, many of which take place online, and often seen as reflecting engagement norms and as involving connective, rather than collective, action, However, the MamaBake case suggests that these new forms of 'political' participation can also involve duty norms and collective action. In other words, it is misguided to see these distinction between duty norms and engagement norms, and between collective action and connective action as dualisms. Finally, while this case study is small, these forms of organising cannot be ignored because they are increasingly common, and the knowledge gained from investigation such groups can in turn be used to address the ongoing concerns about decoupling between political authorities and ordinary citizens

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The Everyday Politics of Parenting: A Case Study of MamaBake

Abstract

The narratives about the decline in political participation are as frequent as they are familiar. The great irony of these narratives, however, is that they occur at a time when citizens have more avenues to voice their opinions than ever before. This article uses Graham's (2012) framework to analyse political talk occurring in the Facebook page of an Australian community group, MamaBake. It highlights two important, but often overlooked trends: political talk can take place in various forums, which do not necessarily have any links to the formal political sphere; and these discussions enrich the everyday politics of the private sphere. However, these new forms of enacting politics usually go unrecognised, reinforcing the dominant narrative of passive, disinterested citizens. Overall, it argues that contemporary research should be sensitive to alternative understanding of politics, to construct a more accurate picture of how politics is enacted in both online and offline spheres.

Keywords*: Everyday politics, process politics, political talk, MamaBake, Australia*

The Everyday Politics of Parenting: A Case Study of MamaBake

Introduction

The political participation of women has certainly been in focus in recent years. Women, according to many, are neither politically active, nor engaging in feminist activism. The gender gaps in political participation have been widely investigated over the past decades, with women often characterised as being less politically engaged than men, even though women are now better represented in many national parliaments, and holding more executive positions compared to previous decades (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010: 318). The perceived lower levels of participation have been explained by reference to attributes such as work status (full time vs part time) (Scholzman et al. 1994, 1999), lower access to socio-economic resources (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010), lower levels of political information, interest and efficacy (Verba et al. 1997) and different gender socialisation processes, leading to passive and private women and outgoing, public sphere-oriented men (Burns 2007; Fox and Lawless 2004).

At the same time, many have suggested that women don't participate less than men, or less than they used to, but rather are finding alternative ways to participate (Dalton, 2006; Harrison and Munn 2007; Stolle and Micheletti 2006) such as community activities and grassroots movements (de Zuniga and Valenzuela 2010). In the context of the wider depoliticisation literature, this distinction is very significant, because it challenges many of the narratives of depoliticisation, which, as Dean (2014) notes, are now widely taken for granted and accepted as true, even without supporting evidence. The problem here is not that women aren't participating, but the fact that the form their

activism often takes is not considered as an 'authentic' moment of politics by those who lament the increasing decline in political activism (Dean 2014).

Of course, this is not just a gender issue, but rather reflects a dominant mode of thinking which privileges and gives credence to formal and institutional politics, such as voting and campaigning, and downplays the many forms of citizen-initiated activism and mass mobilisation that are taking place all over the world, thus contributing to the development of a conceptual blind-spot. As such, Marsh et al. (2007:20) note that the mainstream literature on political participation has usually utilised a narrow, arena definition of 'political', (on the distinction between arena and process definitions see Leftwich, 2004) and there is no doubt that some of these more traditional forms – such as voting and party membership - have declined (Dalton 2006; Putnam 2000; Stoker 2006).

The issue of authenticity becomes even more problematic when the collective action has no direct links to the political arena, and is not trying to influence policy, but rather attempts to change society at the grassroots level – as with the case study, the Australian women's support group MamaBake. While a number of authors (Norris 2002; Marsh et al. 2007; Hay 2007; Bang 2009; Akram et al. 2014) argue for a broader conceptualisation of politics, suggesting that many activities which occur in the social sphere have political resonance[3], more work is still needed in order to capture and describe the instances in which politics can occur outside the formal sphere. This is necessary for two reasons. First, while ordinary citizens now have more avenues than ever before for voicing their

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[3] Indeed Marsh et al. (2007) go as far as to argue that class and gender are themselves political 'lived experiences', rather than variables to be used to explain engagement, or non-engagement, in arena politics.

opinions, in particular given web 2.0, their voices aren't necessarily being heard. This is partly because the forums they utilise aren't acknowledged as legitimate, with the former Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, going as far as describing social media as 'electronic graffiti' (*The Age*, 26 January 2015). Second, the shift to 'life politics' necessitates a new approach to identifying political conversations, 'political talk' online: that is, we have to reconsider both where to look, but also what to look for (Graham 2008: 18).

In this context, this article examines the Facebook feed of MamaBake, an Australian big batch cooking group for mothers', to illustrate how 'talk' in a social networking group can become politicised in particular moments. This in turn offers insights into the character of contemporary forms of political participation, as particularly in a world where social media is increasingly important, political talk, as well as having a role in itself, is also a first step towards political action. First, the putative decline in political activity in Australia will be briefly considered, before establishing why we need to reframe our understanding of 'the political' and then addressing the crucial problem of where the political ends if we move towards a process definition. The final section discusses the MamaBake case to illustrate the issues raised.

Political activity in Australia: In decline?

The two main narratives of the decline focus mainly on the citizens' lack of civic engagement and the risks it presents to a healthy democracy (for example, Arendt 1958; Dunn 2000; Putnam 2000; and Bauman 2007); and on the 'diminishing social movement radicalism and a narrowing of possibilities for egalitarian, radical democratic

alternatives to existing structures of inequality and domination' (Dean 2014: 3; for examples see Boggs 2000; Jacoby 1999; Blühdorn 2006; and Chandler 2009). However, there is also a growing body of literature that challenges the claim that citizens are increasingly apolitical, rather suggesting that, instead of withdrawing from politics, they are now finding new ways to participate, with their activism outside formal political institutions (see, for example, Hay 2007; Norris 2002; Bang 2009; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Ekman and Amnå 2012). Dean uses the term 'apoliticality' to "emphasise the performative, narrative and ideational aspects instead of the more commonly used term 'depoliticisation'", which "typically indexes particular kinds of empirical sociological phenomena" (Dean 2014: 453).

Norris (2002, 2005) identifies new agencies, repertoires and targets available to people through new social movements and the internet. As such, she, like many others (Akram et al., 2014; Bang 2009), questions the idea of increased apathy, arguing that people are engaged less in traditional forms, but more in new forms of political participation. However, Akram et al. (2014) argue that Norris' focus is still too narrow, because she fails to acknowledge the utility of a process definition. Similarly, other attempts to widen the scope have tended to focus on the citizens' ability to influence political outcomes (Brady 1999: 737), thus ignoring a wide range of activities which do not directly engage with the political sphere.

In its 'traditional' sense, politics is seen as a noun, "synonymous with the government, and defined in terms of the site, locus or *arena* within which it occurs" (Hay 2007: 63). The literature has focused extensively on conventional repertoires for civic engagement, "voting, campaign activism, community organizing and particularized contacting

activity" (Norris (2002: 190); a typology originally established by the works of Almond and Verba (1963) and Nie and Kim (1978). Using this frame, the figures on political participation in Australia paint a grim picture, with lower turnout rates in local government elections (ABS, 2010), dropping memberships in the two major Australian political parties (Crikey, 2013), and a decrease in other forms of civic participation (ABS, 2010).[4]

In contrast, Hay (2007: 77) recognises the importance of the process dimension, suggesting that politics is: "the capacity for agency and deliberation in situations of genuine collective or social choice". According to Hay, issues are politicised: "when they become the subject of deliberation, decision making and human agency, where previously they were not". He then notes that issues become "further politicised" when they move from the private sphere of deliberation to the public sphere, as is the case with many issues subject to feminist awareness-raising. In other words, the context is crucial in determining whether an action is political or non-political. A decision taken in isolation which impacts no-one else is, according to Hay, and perhaps rather self-evidently, neither social, nor political. Decisions and actions arising from collective choice, or likely to have collective consequences, on the other hand, are political. However, in moving towards a process definition there is a boundary problem, as it is important not to see all issues as political (Berger 2009; van Deth 2001).

Consequently, the next section addresses two questions: why do we need to view issues traditionally seen as non-political as having political significance? How do we deal with

the boundary problem when adopting a process definition?

A rose by any other name: The importance of re-framing the political

> *One more thing: I think we must listen to what so-called apolitical women have to say—not so we can do a better job of organizing them but because together we are a mass movement. I think we who work full-time in the movement tend to become very narrow. What is happening now is that when non-movement women disagree with us, we assume it's because they are "apolitical," not because there might be something wrong with our thinking.* (Hanisch, 1970).

More than four decades after Hanisch wrote those words in her now classic piece 'Personal is Political', her words still resonate. Many forms of modern activism are either not included in the accounts of declining political activity, or dismissed due to the lack of potential to create any real change. Dean (2014) believes that this is because "many contemporary moments of radical politics (and particularly those concerned with race, gender and sexuality) are seen to fail to 'count' as authentic moments of radical politics" and that radical opposition to capitalism is seen as "the radical political movement par excellence".

One explanation for this is the gendered nature of politics and the way in which women's bodies are still considered a novelty in the political space, and not as an authentic site for politics (Trimble et al. 2013). The media have been shown to play a significant role here, as political reporting "privileges the practice of politics as an essentially male pursuit" by marginalising the feminine (Srebeny-Mohammadi and Ross,

1996:112, cited in Trimble et al. 2013). In terms of political candidates and politicians, women are constrained by a gender double-bind, in that, in order to be successful, they are expected to embody masculine leadership qualities, without losing their feminine qualities (Wright and Holland 2014: 455). The ongoing focus on female politicians' appearance for example amply illustrates the different standards the media often sets to the political actors. The gendered nature of political actors also means that the message they convey takes on a different meaning depending on the gender of the speaker, with the topics relating to the domestic and private sphere matters seen as humanising when voiced by men, but, in contrast, undermining the political authority of women when voiced by them (Trimble et al. 2013).

In this context, MamaBake offers an interesting case study. It is neither directly linked to formal political institutions, nor does it attempt to change policy. It is a site normally excluded from understandings of the political. As the name of the movement implies, MamaBake is by default gendered for targeting mothers as its members. Having received attention from the Australian media, as well as some international publications[5], it on one hand demonstrates the invisibility and inauthenticity of a gendered women's movement as a legitimate site for politics as it has certainly not been invisible from the media audiences of these publications and channels. On the other hand, it allows us to challenge the persistent decline thesis and create alternative narratives of current political activity by showing that politics can occur in a wide range of spaces which may not have any connection to the sites traditionally thought of as 'political'.

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[5] For a selected list of media appearances, see http://mamabake.com/media/

Why should the concept of 'the political' be expanded?

Why does it matter if a group outside the formal political sphere is not seen as political, if their utility in promoting the greater good and increased social capital in society is recognised as such? After all, as Hay (2007: 65) suggests, there is little comfort in finding particular concerns being elevated to the status of 'political', if they remain marginal to the agenda of government. As evidenced by Dean (2014), there is now plenty of theoretical and empirical material to challenge the decline thesis and, yet, the narratives have proven so persistent that they now constitute common knowledge.

According to Polletta (2006: 140), canonical storylines and institutionalised ways of knowing diminish the impact and influence of the challengers' stories. Thus, rather than advancing our knowledge of citizen engagement, the narratives of decline have turned into self-fulfilling prophecies, robbing the alternative forms of engagement of their legitimacy and furthering the disconnect between ordinary people and politics. In other words, as long as the issues are considered as non-political, they will also remain marginal to the agenda of the government. To bridge the gap, we need to look at the concept of citizen engagement in terms of its two interrelated features: voice; and validity.

Traditionally, voting has been perceived as the primary way for citizens to have their voices heard and contribute in the political system (Ekman and Amnå 2012: 285). However, as Li and Marsh's (2008: 248) emphasise, citizens are increasingly "alienated from a political system which doesn't allow them a 'real', that is effective, voice'" This point is echoed by Rosanvallon and Goldhammer (2008: 13), who argue that, while

contemporary democracies provide ample opportunities for citizens to express themselves, their voices aren't valued in the wider political processes. Fiorina and Skocpol (2004: 2-3) have raised similar concerns, but for different reasons. They argue that ordinary citizens have decreasing involvement in shaping common affairs and dwindling leverage over leaders and institutions. Their main focus, however, is on the small number of people who are active, thus leading to narrow causes being promoted over issues relevant to the wider population, subsequently causing ordinary people to further withdraw from politics.

It is rather ironic that the disconnection between citizens and politicians has increased in an era when public voices are more prolific than ever before, due to the availability of new technologies. In part, this reflects changes at an institutional level. As Skocpol (2003: 210) notes, civic organisations no longer need to organise branches and recruit members at the local level in order to be effective. Traditionally, these organisations brought people together and provided them with an avenue for connecting with the political elite and a wide range of concerns have been raised regarding this social erosion (Putnam 2000; Skopcol and Fiorina 1999). In the words of Stolle and Hooghe (2004: 154): "In the absence of mass-based interest mediation organizations, how can we ensure that governments and political systems are accessible to citizen influence?"

In this context, Couldry (2010: 140) distinguishes five new possibilities enabled by recent software innovations: new voices; increased mutual awareness of these voices; new scales of organisation; new spaces required for political organisation; and new intensities of listening. He notes that governments can't any longer say that they don't hear the citizens' voices, but also that, while technologies enable new voices, they don't

guarantee the interactive dimension that is crucial for democracy (Couldry, 2010: 142). Indeed, as illustrated by Abbott's reference to 'electronic graffiti', the disconnect is a direct result of the choices of governments. Here, it is also important to note that if we expand our consideration of online environments, we also need to look beyond strictly political forums. Noting the increase in life politics, Graham (2008:18; 2012: 32) argues that, if we focus only on politically-orientated discussion forums, we run the risk of painting a distorted view of which people discuss politics online, and how. He poses the question of how to identify political talk, which is "less about conventional politics and rooted more in lifestyles – personal life considerations of health, body, sexuality, work, and so forth" and provides a methodological approach to identifying, describing and assessing political talk in non-political discussion forums, which is used in this case study (2008: 19).

Process definitions: The boundary problem

There is clearly a problem if we move beyond an arena definition of politics towards a process definition, or more specifically, from political forums to non-political, lifestyle-based forums, as there may be a tendency to see all action as political. Indeed, Berger (2009: 335-337) argues that the term 'civic engagement' has become all-encompassing, and thus meaningless. He distinguishes between social, moral and civic engagement and argues that we need to restrict the use of the term 'political' to cover only actions, which involve citizens' interaction with political organisations and institutions. For him, personal and private aspects of life only become political when they influence, or are influenced by, political processes and organisations. In this vein, Berger (2009: 340) notes that, while the meaning of the word 'engagement' has multiple definitions, most

theorists see the 'other' of civic engagement as: "narrow individualism, isolationism, or an exclusive focus on oneself or one's intimates". Similarly, others have suggested that expanding the definition of the 'political' has turned it into 'the study of everything' (van Deth, 2001: 4), rendering the term meaningless. In response, such authors want to limit the 'political sphere to the formal political arena and, most often to action, rather than talk.

In contrast, like Hay (2007; see also Alder and Goggin 2005; Ekman and Amnå 2012), this article emphasises the importance of adopting a process definition of politics, which recognises that 'politics' occurs outside the political arena, and can involve talk, as well as action, although, at the same time, recognising that not all everyday activities should be viewed as political. As such, two points are emphasised: First, it demonstrates how arena and the process definitions function as a duality. It distinguishes between a social realm, a proto-political realm and an overtly political realm (for a more detailed discussion here, see Rowe, Halupka, Marsh and Ercan, 2016). Second, it argues that given the increased importance of social media, we need to focus on talk, as well as action, partly because this talk is important in its own right, but also because in the proto-political realm there are both talk and actions which are normally considered as non-political, but under certain circumstances may become politicised. For example, talking about personal breastfeeding experiences online is most often non-political, but using social media to mobilise breastfeeding flash mobs for nurse-ins in public places shifts the social talk towards political action in the formal arena.

This argument echoes Evans and Stoker's (2016) finding that citizens with low levels of participation in formal politics, remain on a 'standby' mode, and have the potential to

engage when the situation so warrants. The crucial point here is that, while this conceptualisation expands our understanding of the political, it does acknowledge, following Hay and others, that there is a non-political, 'social' sphere, while also recognising that we need to focus on the circumstances under which proto-political talk or action can move into the political arena. A first step here, and the focus of this article, is to investigate how to distinguish 'political talk' in the non-political forums.

About the MamaBake group

MamaBake is a community group founded in early 2010 by Michelle Shearer in NSW, Australia. After becoming a mother, Shearer recognised the need for local support networks for mothers and developed the idea that local mothers could get together to cook big batch meals, which could then be shared amongst the participants, with everyone going home with several home-cooked meals. Shearer argues that MamaBake's mission is: 'To enable Mothers to reclaim their own time and access nurturing support for one another through group, big batch dinner cooking'. Using Bennett and Segerberg's (2013: 37) terms, they use personal and inclusive action frames to connect with a wide range of mothers and describe themselves as a: 'revolutionary, grass roots movement of progressive thinking Mamas who take a collaborative approach to Motherhood through group, big batch baking' (Facebook, accessed July 2013).

MamaBake uses social networking sites; Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter, as its main tools for connecting with its audience.6 The content on their social networking sites has either been generated, or selected for circulation, by the group's administrators, and it links loosely to several other online sites. As such, it follows the connective action logic for organisationally-enabled networks as identified by Bennett and Segerberg (2013: 47).7

MamaBake is thus a gendered support group, located outside the formal political arena. Consequently, it is a good example of the kind of social engagement that is often overlooked, partly because the clear gender dimension affects interpretations of their role, and MamaBake immediately evokes the widely-held dualism between the public and the private spheres. The group is also relatively small, though not insignificant. The Facebook page had gained over 5,000 'likes' by May 2012, and by February 2015 the number had reached over 23,000. It is impossible to provide an accurate account of how many MamaBake groups there are in Australia: "I've tried to quantify the memberships, it's been such a guerilla concept. I put a call out to see how many there are in Australia, but the groups are so nebulous... Groups can register and then stop six months later. And there are a lot of people like that, they don't have much involvement online." (Shearer, personal interview, July 2013).

MamaBake also illustrates another central feature of new types of participation. People participating are often not members of a group at all, and, if they are, these groups have

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6 The group also has a website www.mamabake.com, but as the discussions take place on the Facebook page, the website has not been included in the analysis.
7 For Bennett and Segerberg, collective action is based upon centralised coordination, community organising and campaigning in the traditional media. In contrast, connective action relies on shared voluntary self-expression expressed in, and developed through the formation of large social networks.

no formal membership structures and no easily assessable aims. Consequently, measuring and reporting the group's impact becomes very challenging. It also highlights a trend in contemporary political engagement, the importance of connective, as well as collective, action. In a group like MamaBake, people can find communality with others, without permanently committing to a movement or organisation. As such, it is easier for them to retain their individual identity, even within a collective setting. For Bennett and Segerberg (2013), communication functions as organisation, and the digital technology enables the development of loosely connected, interpersonal networks.

Methodology

In order to find out whether Facebook can offer opportunities for political talk in a social setting, outside the pages directly linked to the political arena, such as pages for political parties or individual politicians, the content of MamaBake posts was analysed systematically. Initially, a content analysis was conducted of the Facebook posts made by the MamaBake administrators to identify different categories of posts. Five frequently occurring themes were identified, in which the MamaBake administrators: asked the Facebook community questions (most often related to everyday life events, such as housework, parenting and food preferences); asked the MamaBake community questions on behalf of members; shared links to news articles, blog posts or food-related information; asked for, and shared, household, food or parenting-related tips from the community; and, finally, shared either funny or inspirational pictures and quotes, often related to parenting or relationships. This broad content analysis demonstrated that the same themes occurred several times a week. On this basis, it was determined that a four-month period was sufficient for identifying the occurrence of political talk online. During

this four-month period chosen, (1/11/11 – 28/02/12), MamaBake was gaining visibility in the Australian mainstream media, which increased the number of 'likes' on the Facebook page.

The initial sample was 529 posts by the MamaBake administrators, together with 9092 subsequent comments. This sample was coded by utilising Graham's (2008, 2012) coding scheme for capturing both "conventional and lifestyle-based political issues that arise during the course of everyday conversation" (Graham, 2012: 34). Based on his research on the online discussion forum for the television show 'The Wife Swap', Graham (2008, 2012) observed that on many occasions, 'political talk' emerged in these social discussions. Political talk, he noted, includes everyday conversations carried out freely between participants, which are often spontaneous and "lack purpose outside of talk for talk's sake" (Graham 2012: 32). Graham's approach marks a shift away from the notion of politics as only involving activities that are trying to influence the formal political sphere, or actively effect change. While the resonance with Hay's understanding of politics is obvious, it also provides means for systematically analysing the new forms of participation, addressing some of the methodological issues associated with process politics.

The coding had two stages. First, all 529 posts were examined to identify the political ones, in which a connection is made "from a particular experience, interest, or issue to society in general", and which "stimulates reflection and a response by at least one other participant" Graham (2012: 34). In the second stage of the coding, all comments were divided into three different categories: reasoned claims, non-reasoned claims; and non-claim responses (Graham, 2012: 34). The purpose of this stage was to establish whether

the discussions were guided by rational thought and critical reflection, a requirement for rational-critical debate (Graham, 2012: 35). All reasoned claims were then coded for their evidence type: fact/source; comparison; example; and experience. All responses were also coded for the speech style: humour; emotional comment; or acknowledgement. It should be noted here that this approach differs from Graham's original scheme, which only coded non-claim responses for expressives. This change in approach was deemed necessary as both emotional comments and humour are utilised regularly by both MamaBake administrators and MamaBakers in their communication in order to enhance their arguments. This distinction is important, given the difficulties women face in the political realm and the often-utilised binaries of emotion and rationality, with the former seen as belonging to the private sphere. In the following section, this analysis will be illustrated with a post coded as 'political' and its subsequent comments.

Results and discussion

Of the 529 initial posts, 117 (22 per cent) were coded as political posts, with 1954 subsequent comments. The unit of analysis at this stage was the initial post by MamaBake only. The most common topics were related to feminism, parenting, relationships, work, food systems and health. To qualify as a political post, the initial post had to make a connection to the society in general, e.g. a post about tips for doing housework would not be coded as political, but a post about the gendered inequality of unpaid work in Australia would be moved on to the next stage of coding. Similarly, a post about managing children's behaviour was coded as political when it was linked to a

particular societal structure or practice, such as advertising targeted at children and thus impacting their behaviour when out shopping.

Overall, and unsurprisingly, 'Feminism' and 'Parenting' were the most common categories, with 36 and 24 topics respectively. The chart below demonstrates the division of categories:

Post categories

Legend:
- ■ Food systems
- ■ Parenting
- ■ Health
- ■ Feminism
- ■ Relationships
- ■ Collaborative consumption
- ■ Lifestyle
- ■ Misc
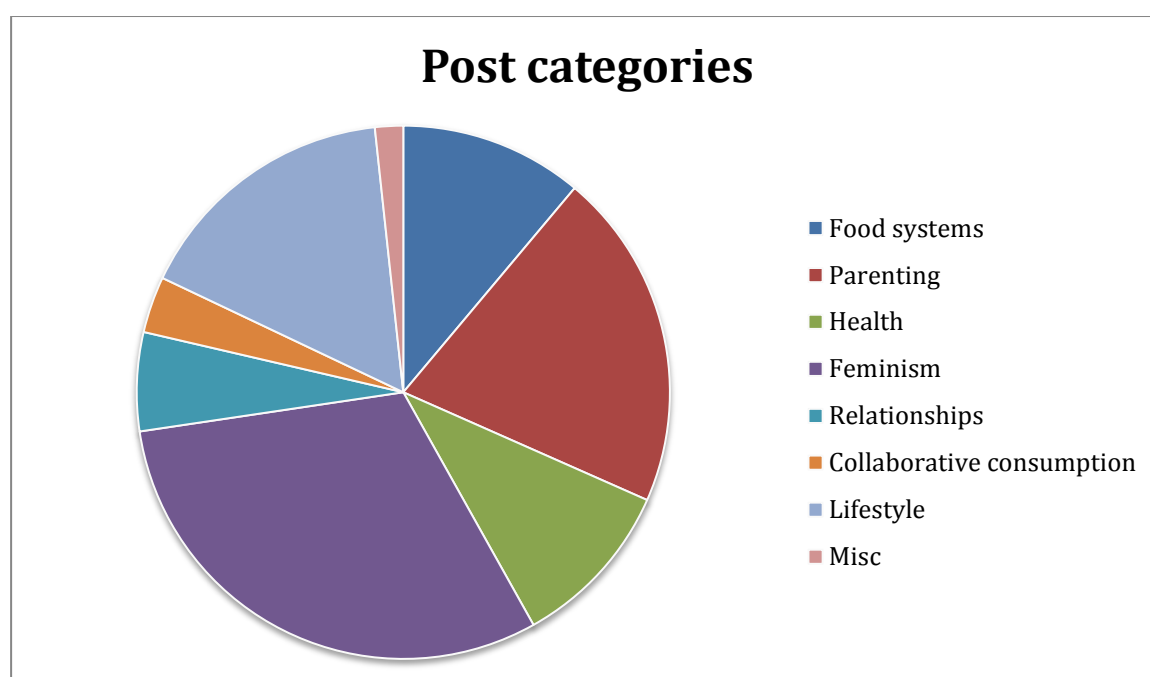
Table 1: The individual topics that generated most responses were:

Post	Simplified content	Category	Comments	Likes
02/11/11	Friday Pow Wow – Marriage, did you take your man's name?	Feminism	59	2
17/11/11	Kids' birthday parties – etiquette	Parenting	55	12
01/02/12	Men posing as pregnant women – what caused the furore?	Feminism	50	3
04/11/11	Grande Pow Wow – Discipline	Parenting	50	24
04/11/11	McDonalds burger not decaying	Food systems	48	20
13/02/12	Threat to alert DoCS if	Parenting	42	4

	7yo walks to the shops alone			
10/02/12	Facebook's breastfeeding policy	Feminism	40	80

For illustrative purposes, the analysis will now focus on one thread to demonstrate how it was carried through the second stage of coding. The thread was chosen because it best demonstrates the interplay of the social and the political, and the moments in which a social topic can move beyond talk and also move towards activism. On 10 February 2012, MamaBake posted the following discussion topic:

Tonight, we talk about Facebook's bizarre and hypocritical stance on breastfeeding images. We want to hear your opinions on it: what you know about it, what people have done about it to protest or do you think they have a point? Have you or your, or one of your fave pages been reprimanded/banned for posting images of breastfeeding? Do you know anyone who has taken their page down in protest? (We have posted the links to some of our fave bloggstresses' posts on the matter below.) Tell us what you think. Even if you're not in the mood for commenting, hit like and feel part of our discussion circle anyway. As with ALL MamaBake debatery, please remember our guiding principle of: Curiosity without Judgement.

The post was accompanied by images of a 'boobie beanie' (a type of a beanie often used by lactivists, which looks like a breast and a nipple when a baby is facing her mother and feeding), and a picture of a baby wearing one while being breastfed. The post elicited 80 'likes', 40 comments, and 15 'shares'. Of the 40 comments, 14 responses were coded as

non-reasoned claims as they were assertions without direct reasoning, such as: "Breast IS Best… I don't care what anyone else says or thinks". Six were coded as non-claim responses (most often acknowledging other participants' posts) and one was excluded as it appeared to be trolling.

Seventeen comments were coded as reasoned claims (that is, they provided a reasoning to support their argument), such as the following response:

> So many mums struggle with breastfeeding and I think if we were braver with breastfeeding images, discussion and feeding in front of others maybe it would be easier for new mums to get the hang of things…. I tried and failed with my first in part because I had no support or information and no idea what resources were available now I'm feeding my second and have posted photos out of pride. I have seen threads were people have called breastfeeding outrageous and disgusting, I want to know why its [sic] ok for an old school mate to post topless modelling photos but not okay to post breastfeeding photos

The comment above is particularly illuminating, as it demonstrates the use of a personal anecdote to highlight a perceived issue with the wider societal structures. This practice was observed in many of the comments regarding this topic. Other commenters also discussed the utility of the discussion itself, with #16 voicing her disbelief that such conversation was still taking place, and people needing to "get over it". #18 acknowledged the comment, and noted: "Yes, that the discussion still goes on is pretty disappointing. But while ever there are women feeling pressured to breastfeed in toilets,

with modesty blankets or worse still, too afraid to feed in public at all, go on it must."

Overall, the importance of information sharing was acknowledged, with some arguing that it may have the ability to influence breastfeeding rates: "Maybe if there was more discussion about breastfeeding then more women would be able to do it. It's not natural like we are led to believe, it's a learned skill on both the mother and baby's side and it's damn hard when you don't know what you are doing." (#22). Another person also acknowledged the blurred boundaries of the private and the public:

> When my first bubba was 6 months old we did a BF Photo shoot for a government health agency to help 'promote BF' for new mums, beautiful pics, but now everyone of my friends who get pregnant come waving the booklet at me to show me how they have now seen pics of my boobs, funniest of all is that many of the pics have been made into posters and plastered all over my work place! (#14)

The humour from the initial post provided by the images carried through some comments, with people reporting taking action and protesting against the ban: "Well. My profile pic is now a shot of my nipple and my son in a happy partnership." (#1), and "Get your tits out ladies… Boobies rock!!!" (#5). Others also joked about reporting pictures of adults eating (#20). The most common criticism was directed at the perceived hypocritical stance of Facebook, allowing other offensive material to be published: "It makes me angry that breastfeeding pics are removed when there are so many other pictures which are ACTUALLY offensive. Racist, homophobic, pornographic… they're all still here and yet some healthy lunch for babies is removed" (#6). Few also noted that it was most likely a bot or software, and not people removing the images, before adding: "It's a shame the software can't tell a woman feeding a bub from a 15 year old with her

ankles up by her ears…" (#7). As is customary for most MamaBake discussions, despite the occasional raunchy language the conversation stayed civil and there were no personal insults amongst the participants.

Despite the obvious passion in the topic, demonstrated by the presence of emotional comments, the breastfeeding post was characterised by overall unanimity regarding women's right to breastfeed openly, although disagreement manifested in the individual notions of what level of exposure was appropriate. The one thing to note in particular, is the use of personal anecdotes and emotional comments throughout the conversation, and in conjunction with rational debates, challenging the often-evoked binary of rational/emotional. Overall, the presence of emotion depended largely on the topic. Discussions about such issues as when it is acceptable to leave children alone at home (13/02/12) were mainly characterised by reasoned claims with few expressives, whereas a discussion on the health aspects of take-away burgers (04/11/11) elicited vivid emotional responses.

Table 2 demonstrates how the comments were analysed

Table 2. Stage 2 coding

Comment #	Response type	Speech style/s	Content
22	Reasoned claim	Argument; Expressive / Emotional comment	My question is who do Facebook think they are protecting by removing the photos? It's not the children, they are getting the food that they need, it's not the mother's they are proudly showing off their babies and if your privacy settings are set correctly then only people you want to see these photos are seeing them. Breastfeeding is not sex related, its about nourishing your child. Yes I agree Mr Facebook, remove nudity and offensive photos but there is nothing wrong, rude or offensive about breastfeeding. Maybe if there was more discussion about breastfeeding then more women would be

			able to do it. It's not natural like we are led to believe, it's a learned skill on both the mother and baby's side and its damn hard when you don't know what you are doing. BOOOOOO facebook being unsupportive of mothers and families.
7	Reasoned claim	Critical reflection	I have yet to read any comments from Facebook about the issue but would be interested to hear what they say. I honestly think the pictures that have been removed are likely to have been taken down due to them being 'reported' - now this would mean that someone who is a 'friend' of the person, depending on privacy settings would have reported the pic. I might be being naive, but I don't think Facebook have the time or programmes to trawl FB pics to 'detect' which ones include a breast and a baby. If they did, there would be a huge number of the 'tits and ass' pics removed as a lot of them seriously border on pornographic. I believe that there is nothing wrong with breastfeeding in whatever situation a mother is in - I breastfed for a total of just over 3 years with my two children, but I think we also have to recognise that there are going to be people out there who think this type of picture is too confronting. I would like to know more about the individual circumstances where the profiles were suspended, which is probably not going to be made public, and think that perhaps we need to be more conscious of our audiences that we are releasing our pictures to.
	Non-reasoned claim	Assertion	Breast IS Best.... i don't care what anyone else says or thinks [smile emoticon]
15	Non-claim response	Expressive / Humor	I love breastfeeding and you know what, I think I make that shit look gooood. So will I share photos on FB? You'd better believe it!
27	Reasoned claim	Fact	This is what a Facebook statement says: Facebook released a statement on Wednesday saying the majority of breast feeding photos are compliant with their statement of rights and those will not be taken down. They say photos that contain a fully-exposed breast violate their terms and may be removed if they are reported.

As the above example demonstrates, political talk can be found in forums and pages
normally regarded as non-political. While only 22 per cent of the posts were identified
as political, the ensuing conversations were rational and respectful towards the other

participants. While some discussions certainly appeared to be just "talk for talk's sake", others had a bigger purpose, as noted by the breastfeeding topic commenters. The fact that the discussion took place in a forum mostly targeted at mothers may have contributed to the overall openness and frankness of the comments by creating a safe space for self-expression, unlike the broader public sphere, whether online of offline, that has been characterised as hostile and disparaging to women's voices. As such, the gender dimension in this instance was one of the strengths of the political discussion, rather than a hindrance to 'real' and 'legitimate' politics.

It is important to underscore that MamaBake is not an identity group, but rather the commenters are a group of similarly situated actors. As such, while they are united under the broad banner of motherhood, their individual motives for taking part are unique and varied, and their individuality is explicitly celebrated through MamaBake's often utilised slogan: 'Curiosity without Judgment', which also functions to stop trolling and personal insults. Consequently, the way in which people responded varied a lot, from expressing opinions and sharing personal experiences, to engaging in concrete protests such as changing their own profile pictures. The use of images and humour to make a point further emphasises the fact that the forum is inclusive of various styles of making claims. As such, social forums may even surpass formal political forums in terms of richness of debate and the quality of opinions shared.

The four features of politics identified by Hay (2007) are clearly present in MamaBake Facebook discussions: a situation of choice; a capacity for agency; deliberation; and social interaction. The participants recognise that they have some capacity, albeit limited, to influence the current situation; and they have the means to do so by both

taking deliberate action, by engaging in rational debate in a public forum. As Polletta (2006: 140) notes, with the right narrative tools, groups like MamaBake can highlight cultural norms and social bases of inequality, in doing so their activity is clearly political using a process definition. In this way, MamaBake group is telling a 'political' story about the current work and family conditions of women; a story which is too easy to dismiss against the backdrop of the more familiar story about the distinction between public and private work, and the gendered dimension of the movement itself.

The key point here, however, is to recognise the utility of the debate itself instead than focusing on its potential to influence policy, as groups such as MamaBake can act as an enabler of political expression, a site of 'political talk' rather than being political in and of themselves. Much of the literature emphasises the ways in which women are not participating, although there has been some recognition of the different forms that their participation takes. With the noted increase in life politics, the social and the private inherently link to the public sphere, and are often utilised to enhance the debate, as was the case with the breastfeeding discussion. As such, it is crucial that we start looking beyond the traditional arenas and forums, and develop new narratives of the actual practices that do take place, if we are to truly acknowledge the legitimacy of these currently often marginalised voices, and incorporate them into the democratic practices.

Conclusion

A few conclusions emerge from the case. The MamaBake posts are, by definition, about talk, not action in a clearly gendered dimension, but that doesn't make them non-political, or inauthentic. As Graham emphasises, talk can be political, and as we have

seen, a significant portion of the discussion on the MamaBake site is political. Organisations like MamaBake are becoming more important, as involvement in such organisations is increasing at the same time as memberships in many traditional interest groups is declining. As such, we need to recognise the new form of 'politics' and political participation, where most citizens don't see the need to be members of parties or organisations, which are directly and consistently involved in the political arena.

That social media can foster discussion and debate is widely accepted. However, what is more contested is the value of such debate, with many still arguing for a distinction between the formal arena of politics and lifestyle related issues. This case study demonstrates that such distinctions need to be re-evaluated, given the fact that arena and process definitions of the politics are inherently linked to each other. Social media enables groups such as MamaBake to draw attention to issues they find important. These issues may link to the formal arena, but they may also just be creating opportunities for public deliberation regarding issues of collective interest, and facilitating 'talk for talk's sake'. As such, the talk itself carries the meaning, and not its intended consequence, necessitating a broader approach to politics, one which doesn't view the impact on policy as the only valid outcome. The biggest issue in this context, and the one which must be addressed explicitly, is the risk of rendering concepts obsolete. As such, through the use of Graham's coding framework, this case study demonstrates a way of identifying the moments in which a social forum moves towards political talk. More broadly, the implications of such an analysis are significant, as they demonstrate the importance of taking everyday talk into account when exploring the citizens' levels of political engagement. Conversely, failing to do so would severely impact our ability stay open and reflexive to the needs and opinions of the changing society, as well as further the gap between the political elite and the everyday people.

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Beyond Uber and Airbnb: The social economy of collaborative consumption

Abstract

The growing collaborative consumption movement has evolved significantly in the age of Web 2.0. While much of the research has focused on its economic aspects, there are also a range of practices that have thus far gone largely unnoticed. This article illustrates the range of these practices by proposing a typology that accounts for the various currencies exchanged and digital technologies used to promote sharing of goods and services. In particular, the article focuses on the social aspects of the collaborative consumption movement to construct a full picture of the concept. It presents a case study of an Australian grassroots community group, MamaBake, which promotes the communal cooking and sharing of meals between mothers. In doing so, it conceptualises alternative manifestations of the collaborative consumption movement that go beyond market orientation and instead focuses on promoting soft, non-economic values.

Keywords: Collaborative consumption, social economy, alternative currency, MamaBake

Beyond Uber and Airbnb: The social economy of collaborative consumption

Introduction

Collaborative consumption has certainly become a buzzword in recent years, with journalists and academics alike noting the proliferation of activities falling under this broad banner. However, most of the research on collaborative consumption to date has focused on its impacts on: the economy (Belk 2014; Zervas et al. 2014); consumer behaviour (Cheetham 2009; Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012); different types of marketplaces (Cherrier 2009; Albinsson and Perera, 2009, 2012); or downshifting (Black and Cherrier 2010). Recently profiled by a journalist as a 'tech-utopian answer to having too much stuff' (Munro 2016), most of the criticism aimed at the concept has similarly addressed the shortcomings of the practice from an economic point of view (Slee 2015; Rushkoff 2016). As such, there has been limited research on collaborative consumption in settings where its justification is not based on environmental sustainability or downshifting, or, alternatively, practiced as a form of resistance towards the capitalist economic model.

One aspect, which has received less focus to date, is the social component of collaborative consumption initiatives. This article investigates collaborative consumption in an Australian community-based, big batch cooking group for mothers, MamaBake. MamaBake differs from the previously researched forms of collaborative consumption in a key way. The collaborative aspect of the activity is a tool that is used to bring people together with the aim of improving the lives of mothers, while simultaneously discursively challenging the underlying societal and institutional structures that promote the traditional model of men as breadwinners, women as homemakers. Consequently, its focus on the underlying soft, non-economic values provide an insight into the collaborative aspects currently absent from the extant literature.

Despite the differences in both the practical application and the theoretical framing of the collaborative consumption concept, there is little doubt about the significance of

social media in enabling the rapid growth and spread of such initiatives. However, as Couldry (2012: xiv) argues, it is important to note what all people, and not just the technophiliac elite, are doing with media, as it is in the everyday media practice that we find out how the media relates to society and the world. The MamaBakers are predominantly a group of mothers, who connect both online and offline in order to ease their domestic workload. This article illustrates the way in which ordinary citizens can utilise the technologies available to them in their everyday lives. In discussing the role played by digital technology in facilitating MamaBake's mission to move the act of cooking for one's family from the private sphere into a communal environment as a shared activity, this study moves beyond the dichotomy between individual and collective action, focusing instead on the underlying connective action logic. Overall, this article contributes to the literature on collaborative consumption by underscoring the range of practices that go beyond the market-orientation and the types of agencies mobilised by this mediated form of action.

This article begins by examining the various theoretical approaches to collaborative consumption. It discusses the criticism directed at the concept, and demonstrates its limited nature due to its narrow economic focus. The article then develops a typology and adds another dimension to it: a focus upon collaborative consumption run and practised by everyday people, completely outside any large-scale institutions or, alternatively, government intervention or assistance. The second, most substantive, section demonstrates how MamaBake creates a space for collaborative consumption outside the economic framework. It shows how the movement operates in an environment where ideology is only implied, and the organisation is largely driven by pragmatic considerations. The underlying connective action logic is also discussed. The article concludes by noting that, while the social dimensions of the collaborative consumption movement are significant and need to be explored, it is also important not to create a false division between the economic models and the social forms of the practice, as the first is always a necessary feature of the society, and the latter cannot take place in a vacuum isolated from the first.

The many faces of collaboration: From neoliberal economies to the social

Defining collaborative consumption

In recent years, collaborative consumption has become a common term, with initiatives such as Airbnb (accommodation) and Uber (taxi services) building large international networks and challenging services historically offered by more traditional businesses. These two, while arguably the ones with the biggest impact, are just an example of the many initiatives falling under this broad banner. Other examples, depending on the definitions used, include initiatives focused on directly sharing or donating unwanted items within local communities (TuShare and Freecycle), sharing goods such as tools, which might otherwise only be used sporadically (OpenShed), or even connecting those wanting to grow vegetables with people who have spare land (Landshare). Albinsson and Perera (2012: 303) suggest that this rise of alternative, often more responsible, forms of consumption and disposition practices may be linked to the increased awareness of the negative effects of over-consumption, as well as to the global financial downturn of the late noughties. With such a wide range of initiatives, providing an accurate definition of the concept proves to be challenging, and there are some disagreements about the usage of the term (Belk 2014). First, the various definitions, with their associated criticisms will be examined, before discussing the need to broaden the scope for the study of collaborative consumption.

While the use of the concept of collaborative consumption has surged since the late 2000s, the idea itself is not new. As early as 1978, Felson and Spaet (p.614) used the term to describe events in which people were consuming goods, while engaging in joint activities. The problem with their definition lies with the open-ended boundaries, as, by default, it would include activities such as having a beer with friends while watching sports, thus reducing the utility of the term. Hamari et al. (2015: 1), on the other hand, define the sharing economy as "an umbrella concept that encompasses several ICT developments and technologies, among other [collaborative consumption], which endorses sharing the consumption of goods and services through *online* platforms" (emphasis in original). They further define it as "the peer-to-peer-based activity of

obtaining, giving, or sharing access to good and services, coordinated through community-based online services (Hamari et al. 2015: 3). Similarly, Botsman and Rogers (2010: xv) describe the concept as "traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting and swapping".

Belk (2014: 1597), on the other hand, puts stricter parameters on the term, arguing that collaborative consumption is "people coordinating acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation", which includes bartering, trading and swapping and receiving non-monetary compensation. His definition excludes sites such as CouchSurfing, which prohibits asking for compensation, and gifting or giving, involving a permanent transfer of ownership, as is the case with TuShare and Freecycle. Belk (2014) notes that collaborative consumption occupies a middle ground between sharing and marketplace exchange, with elements of both. Regardless of the types of goods and services offered, it seems generally acknowledged that collaborative consumption is concerned with providing access – often on a temporary basis - to goods and services, as opposed to ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012).

As is obvious from the definitions above, much of the discussion to date has been market-focused. This is further exacerbated by the collaborative consumption movement's potential for enormous economic impacts (Minifie and Trent 2016). For example, in 2015 Airbnb and Uber had an estimated value of $25 and $62 US billion respectively (Minifie and Trent 2016). It is then hardly surprising that much of the criticism directed towards the concept of collaborative consumption has focused almost solely on the impacts to the economy, and subsequently the consequences it may have for regular citizens. As noted by Minifie and Trent (2016), collaborative consumption has been criticised for "risking work standards, consumer safety and local amenity, and eroding the tax base". These concerns have been echoed in the print media, with concerns being raised about the possibility that instead of creating true peer-to-peer services, businesses such as Uber are creating new middle-men in the form of unregulated global giants, extending free market practices into previously regulated areas of lives (Munro 2016). As such, what is often described as a market revolution, instead ends up mimicking traditional business models, with the main purpose of

creating profit for the shareholders, and thus falling in the paradigm of the predatory neoliberal system.

Expanding the scope: Developing the typology

Such criticisms are naturally warranted, and should be subjected to a thorough investigation. The concern here, however, is that at present, the perception of collaborative consumption is firmly embedded in the movements of the market arena, thus downplaying the diversity of the movement. Indeed, the fact that the term 'sharing economy' is often used interchangeably with collaborative consumption is telling. While other initiatives have also gained visibility in the media, they are rarely subjected to the same level of scrutiny as the initiatives with direct financial impacts, or they are seen as embodying more noble values than those initiatives operating for profit.[8] As a result, the mainstream narratives of collaborative consumption are lopsided, lacking the nuances which the movement exhibits. There are many emerging practices of collaborative consumption that underscore the actual collaborative aspect, rather than the often profit-driven consumption model. Table 1 demonstrates some of the nuances of the practices within the collaborative consumption movement. This typology illustrates the diversity of collaborative consumption practices and the ways in which they utilise digital technologies, while providing examples drawn from collaborative consumption initiatives operating in Australia.

Table 1: Various manifestations of the collaborative consumption movement

TYPE OF COLLABORATIVE CONSUMPTION	DESCRIPTION	CURRENCY	USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES	EXAMPLES
Market	Often operated by large multinationals; profit-oriented.	Money	Apps; one-way communication except for feedback mechanism	Airbnb; Uber;
Government	Community programs;	Services	Online membership; central website	Timebanking

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[8] The concept of Timebanking, for instance, was recently uncritically presented as "*the real sharing economy*" in The Sydney Morning Herald (Browne 2016, emphasis mine).

	volunteering; government enabled or assisted.		repository	
Advocacy	Community programs; run by individuals or groups; ideologically-driven e.g. environmentalism	Products and services	Email lists; apps; social media; two-way communication	BarterEconomy Canberra; Freecycle; Tushare
Social	Run by individuals; promote social cooperation	Products; services; values; time	Some, or all of the following: central repository, two-way communication on social media, apps.	MamaBake; Bakesw@p

The table proposes four categories to make sense of collaborative consumption, each with their distinctive characteristics: market; government; advocacy; and social. The categories aren't mutually exclusive and some overlap naturally occurs. However, this categorisation illustrates the wide range of initiatives that fall under the broad banner of collaborative consumption. To further illustrate the point, I will now provide a brief overview of the categories.

i) *Market*

This is the best-known category of collaborative consumption. Businesses in this category are based on traditional extractive economic models, with the purpose of creating value for the shareholders. Examples of such businesses include large multinationals such as Airbnb, which provides peer-to-peer accommodation, and Uber, which challenges traditional taxi services. From the user's perspective, the transaction resembles that involved with traditional business models in that they pay money for the services they receive. On the surface at least, such businesses appear to increase the autonomy of the workers, as is the case with Uber drivers for example, but the risks here include the current lack of regulation and the reduced financial security of the workers, while the businesses operating the venture collect the increasingly significant profits.

Such ventures are often heralded for their ability to increase consumer power, and the role of the internet in enabling this has been well-acknowledged (Labrecque et al. 2013), with Web 2.0 in particular being an important factor in facilitating the rise of collaborative consumption initiatives (Hamari et al. 2015; Belk 2014). However, much of their use of digital technologies is done through mobile applications, and the user communication is limited to the feedback mechanisms – which form a crucial part of these services - provided by the platform. At this level, technical knowledge is required in order to develop the appropriate applications, and the distribution is often accompanied by professional marketing campaigns.

ii) Government

Community programs promoting softer values, but which are either run by, or receive funding from, the government fall under this category. Initiatives in this category still have one central organising body, but they differ from the market-based approach in that the service transactions do not involve money. It also differs from traditional volunteering and community services in that services are traded on a quid pro quo basis, promoting mutual reciprocity on a larger scale. In Australia, the most notable example is Timebanking, which is provided by the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Communities (timebanking.com.au). As the name implies, the program allows members to earn time-credits by sharing their time and skills with others, and in exchange, use the credits to receive services from other members. The timebanking website requires users to set up their accounts, after which they can browse any requests for help posted on the website and manage their own transactions. To this extent, digital technology is used to organise the participation, but it lacks the discursive peer-to-peer interaction associated with social media platforms. While a thorough criticism of this practice is outside the scope of this article, two points ought to be considered: The shifting of services traditionally associated with a state-provided social safety-net raises interesting questions about neoliberal fragmentation, and the increasing responsibility individuals are given for their own wellbeing. Secondly, the ethics of 'helping others' could be challenged, when the act of helping is at least partly

done under the impression that the helper will also gain equal benefits from the transaction.

iii)   *Advocacy*

As noted above, advocacy has played a significant part in the growing success of the collaborative consumption movement, with downshifting and environmental concerns featuring strongly in many of the collaborative consumption initiatives. This category includes community programs run by groups or individuals, which do not have any direct links to the government. Examples include various product and produce swap groups, such as BarterEconomy Canberra, and lifestyle related groups linked to downsizing, such as the OpenShed. These groups don't use money as their currency, trading products and services instead. The groups utilise social media heavily in order to both reach their audience and provide a platform through which the transactions take place. Social media platforms such as Facebook enable even non-technical users to easily create their own 'marketplace' online, and it also provides the participants an instantaneous connection with like-minded groups and people. The level of involvement from the group administrators varies, but, quite commonly, they provide the basic parameters and the site which enables the transaction, leaving the actual organisation of the swaps to the participators when it suits them, as is the case with BarterEconomy Canberra.

iv)   *Social*

Finally, the aspect of collaborative consumption which has received the least attention to date, are groups which bear many similarities with those in the advocacy category, but which utilise the concept of collaboration to further social causes, rather than being linked to a single ideology per se. These groups are often run by individuals, and the currencies they utilise can extend beyond products and services, to more abstract constructs such as shared values and free time. Examples of these groups include groups such as MamaBake and BakeSw@p. Like the advocacy-based groups, these groups utilise social and other forms of digital media heavily, and participation is often characterised

by what Bennett and Segerber (2013) termed connective action. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2013), contemporary participation is characterised by personal action frames, as opposed to the ideology or class-based collective action frames traditionally utilised in collective action. In their view, communication functions as an organisational structure, resulting in loosely connected interpersonal networks, without central organisation. As such, Bennett and Segerberg's work builds on the significant body of literature emphasising the importance of engagement norms, over the traditional duty-based norms (see for example Norris 2011; Bang 2009). This was also reflected in one of the few investigations to date on what motivates people to participate in collaborative consumption. Hamari et al.'s (2015) analysis showed that participation is motivated by factors such as sustainability, enjoyment of the activity and economic gain, with enjoyment being the strongest determinant

This brief overview demonstrates the diversity of the practice, and shows that the criticism regarding its financial impacts only captures the market orientation. It is important to understand collaborative consumption in this manner to surface various manifestations of the movement. While each section of the table warrants a full investigation, the focus of this article is on the social level, as it is the aspect which to date has received the least attention. The next section illustrates the social aspect of the collaborative consumption movement with an analysis of an Australian community group for mothers, MamaBake.

MamaBake: Putting the social into collaborative consumption

Introducing MamaBake

The MamaBake group was listed as one of the pioneers of the collaborative consumption movement in early 2011 (Andersen 2011). The group was founded by Michelle Shearer in early 2010 in NSW, Australia. The basic idea behind the initiative is very simple: mothers get together to cook big batch meals together, which are then shared amongst the participants so that everyone will go home with several home-cooked meals. The idea was born when a friend of Shearer's spontaneously brought her dinner, so that she

would not have to cook that night. As a mother herself, Shearer had noticed women's disproportionate share of the domestic duties, the lack of support infrastructure available for mothers, as well as the increasing competitiveness and judgmental atmosphere amongst parents, and she wanted to find a way to bring back community support. Initially, she used the concept with her group of friends, but as the word of mouth spread, she created the Facebook page (www.facebook.com/MamaBakeHQ) and subsequently the website which features a large database for recipes and blog posts among other things: www.mamabake.com, and the idea started rapidly gaining attention from both the public and the media.

In 2015, MamaBake utilised a wide range of online platforms to spread its message, including Pinterest, Instagram and Twitter, and by August 2015 it had nearly 25,000 followers on Facebook (Facebook accessed 15 August 2015). Its online platforms assist people with finding other mothers with whom to MamaBake, and they also provide practical hints, tips and support for both MamaBake specific topics, as well as for those related to general parenting and food. MamaBake is not centrally organised in the sense that it does not organise the local groups for participants, rather, it acts as the repository of information, which is shared amongst the users who drive the formation of their own MamaBake groups. Partially for this reason, it is impossible to establish how many actual participants and MamaBake groups there are at any given time. The number of Facebook followers provides a rough indication of interest, but it doesn't capture the number of people who actually practice MamaBaking.

Capturing the MamaBake group

In order to capture the collaborative nature of the MamaBake movement, a mixed method approach for data collection was adopted to gain a better understanding of the group. First, participant observation was used on the group's Facebook page, as well as in real life MamaBake groups in Canberra, Australia. As noted by Mosca (2014: 401), Facebook represents a "walled garden" – it can "illuminate internal debates of contemporary mobilization, although going beyond public profiles of groups and well-known activists and entering inner circles is not always possible". Participant observation was complemented by a content analysis of both the Facebook page and the

MamaBake website over a two-year period, and the content was coded thematically. This analysis is complemented by an in-depth, semi-structured interview with the founder of the group, Michelle Shearer, in person (July 2013). Attending MamaBake cooking sessions as a participant, as well as conducting a face to face interview, enabled access to the 'inner circles' – that is, to the offline elements, of the group. Finally, a survey (n = 40) was posted on the MamaBake's Facebook feed to capture the views of some of the participants. The survey combined both open-ended and closed questions, and the responses were coded thematically. Responses which reflected more than one category were coded under all relevant themes, so a particular response could simultaneously be in more than one category. A link to the survey was also tweeted at the same time. The combination of methods enabled the blending of online and offline elements.

While recent years has seen a surge in food-sharing applications online, and in particular for smartphone applications (see for example BakeSw@p application and website for baking and sharing lunch box snacks; and HomeCooked application for purchasing 'take away' from home cooks in your area), MamaBake was the first group in Australia to popularise the concept. It has proved its longevity by being in operation for over six years, and, as such, provides rich data for the investigation. By providing a virtual space for mothers to come together and to find others in order to build their real life support networks in which the actual sharing of the food takes place, MamaBake is an exemplar of how collaborative consumption can create a space for new political economy, outside the traditional capitalist model. The next section discusses this in more detail by analysing the characteristics of the MamaBake group.

MamaBake as a form of collaborative consumption

I. Value-oriented goals

The biggest and most obvious difference between MamaBake and the likes of Airbnb and Uber, is the fact that it is largely driven by value- rather than profit-oriented goals. In other words, one of the key aims of MamaBake is to liberate mothers from the

disproportionate amount of domestic chores they perform at home, by providing a workaround in the form of collaborative cooking. Such an approach of course benefits the participants, but provides very little tangible rewards for the founder and the administrators of the group. However, that is not to underplay the importance of the activity, since Shearer's personal experience of lacking support networks and the gendered nature of domestic labor is also reflected in the national statistics. In Australia, the gender question in relation to the home is still very relevant, as, according to the latest 'The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia' (HILDA)[9] survey, women still carry the main responsibility for housework, regardless of their employment status or income. In households where women are the main breadwinners, they do around 21.5 hours of housework a week, while men do around 17.5 (Jericho 2014). The imbalance is more pronounced when childcare hours are included: in households with women as the main breadwinners, men spend 13 hours a week caring for their children, compared to women's 22.5 hours. When all three components – paid work, housework and childcare - are combined, in households where men and women earn equal amounts, men do around 71 hours in total, while women end up doing around 93 hours (Jericho 2014).

Juxtaposed with the question posed by a journalist regarding the sharing economy, the contrast could not be starker:

> What if the march of technology, under the guise of making our lives easier, freer, more connected, is actually beginning to wipe out secure livelihoods for the masses, and concentrating wealth in a new tech elite?
>
> (Munro 2016, The *Sydney Morning Herald*)

While all manifestations of collaborative consumption are likely to share the desire to reach as many people as possible, and expand their audiences in order to build their empires, MamaBake aims to do so because it believes it can contribute to the overall wellbeing of mothers, and as such, to the overall social cohesion of families. In contrast,

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[9] The HILDA survey is an Australian Government initiated and funded survey, designed and managed by Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne. It is a household-based panel study, which began in 2011, and it collects information about economic and subjective well-being, labour market dynamics and family dynamics (https://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/).

businesses such as Uber promise a fairer marketplace with more variety for the consumers, but such promises are carried out with significant risks to the society as a whole, with the main beneficiary being the conglomerate behind the initiative.

II.   Currency

As the typology of the different manifestations of the collaborative consumption movement illustrates, the currencies these practices use are often something other than money, with services and product swaps featuring significantly. However, while MamaBaking involves both a product – the ready cooked meals – and service – the cooking itself, it also adds an intangible dimension to the process. The 'currency' the MamaBakers gain from this, and articulated as one of the key aims of the movement, is free time for themselves, and access to a community of other mothers. Contra Belk's (2014) conceptualisation of collaborative consumption, which emphasised the role of compensation, in the case of MamaBake, the norms of the exchange are at least as important as the swapping of the meals itself. The survey responses reflected this, with 'food' and 'community' being the most commonly mentioned themes for 'What does MamaBake mean to you?'. 'Support', 'fun' and, 'free time' also received several mentions. Similar results were obtained from the multiple-choice question, which asked: "Why do you MamaBake?" Here, half of the respondents noted that they did it because they wanted 'to build a community of like-minded parents', with the same number selecting 'So I don't have to cook dinner every night'. Almost as popular were 'Because it's enjoyable', 'To do something productive with my friends' and 'I love cooking'. When asked about the most important aspect of a real life MamaBake session, 'friendship' and 'community building' were the most significant factors, while food was the most important factor for only four respondents.

The notion of community is repeated frequently on the MamaBake's online sites, highlighting the benefits to individual mothers:

> Once you're part of a MamaBake group, you are very much on somebody
> else's radar when you need back up. We've had mums get help from other

mums with moving house, cleaning bees and meal care packages when a mama is sick or has recently birthed. The MamaBake concept offers mothers many in-real-life positive benefits. (*How to host a MamaBake session,* Mamabake.com, accessed August 2015)

As such, the MamaBake participants are brought together by shared norms of reciprocity, good will to those experiencing hardship or who have recently given birth, and a recognition that motherhood can be hard at times, and that it is work. When probed about this during the personal interview, the founder noted that the important aspect of doing this publicly was to highlight the behaviour, and thus give women the permission to receive help without having the immediacy of reciprocation. However, she also suggested that the idea of reciprocity was innate to many mothers. When she was given the gift of a home-cooked meal, it had given her freedom that she didn't have much of at the time as a mother of two young children, and she immediately wanted to reciprocate and "cancel the transaction" (Shearer, personal interview July 2013). This prompted her to devise a concept that would allow everyone to have this freedom, and given MamaBake's popularity, it is obvious that the idea is resonating with a lot of women.

Hamari et al. (2015) postulate a worst-case scenario for collaborative consumption, in which some people opportunistically seek economic benefits and therefore enjoy the benefits provided by those who have more altruistic motivations and share their goods with others (a 'free rider' problem). The MamaBake group does not appear to be at risk of this happening, since, while the group transactions do not involve any monetary compensation, most commonly the sharing of the meals is based on the idea of immediate reciprocity. That is, anyone who participates in a real life MamaBake session is, in most circumstances, expected to contribute by cooking a big batch meal to be shared amongst the participants. Although helping out those in need is a strong factor in the movement, this usually occurs for a limited period of time and under special circumstances. In this vein, the founder described in an online interview the movement's best moment thus far:

putting a shout out on the MamaBake Facebook wall for a number of Mothers who hit Struggle Town in a major way (surgery, nervous breakdowns..) and seeing how Mothers in their area rallied and organised weeks and weeks of meals and cleaning so the Mother could recover. MamaBake came into its own in those weeks. (*www.collaborativeconsumption.com,* accessed March 2015)

However, while the movement does not include an exchange of cash per se, the actual act of MamaBaking includes a financial aspect, and sometimes can be a site of contention amongst the participants. The MamaBake group itself puts forward the idea that money should not be an issue:

We know this sounds counter intuitive but don't think about cost. What you'll find is that once you start, MamaBake is something you will do again and again and that everything just works out, expense wise, over a period of time. One week you'll be able to knock up a big batch Moroccan Lamb Harira the next it might be the humble dahl.

There is a silent agreement when you start MamaBaking that you make what you can when you can and that you give (at some point) the same as you receive. (*http://mamabake.com/faq/,* accessed March 2015)

However, this approach was not accepted unanimously by the survey respondents. When asked whether they had encountered any issues while MamaBaking, the following responses were elicited:

- "Inequity in meals. The same meal being given over and over."
- "Quantities, it was awkward when we didn't have enough."
- "The organization is time-consuming and the effort exerted to cook large meals sometimes does not pay off."
- "Swapping meals of near value – some put little effort in and others a lot."

This shows that, while mostly focusing on the soft, communal values, the currency can also be stigmatising at the same time under certain circumstances. The sharing that MamaBake promotes creates a new political economy, in which the sharing not only

creates social ties, but also physical products in the form of home cooked meals. As illustrated by the responses, the participants are already trading their time and effort during the process of organising and cooking a large meal. This may lead to having certain preconceived expectations about the product they will receive as an exchange. While the MamaBake's approach treats the intangible act of sharing itself as the key aspect of the process, for some participants, the product itself is more important.

As a final note regarding money, it should be noted that the movement has attempted to generate some profit through the website in order to stay viable, but these have been completely voluntary in nature and have not impacted the individuals' ability to participate in MamaBake in any way. Rather, the paid features have been optional extras. For example, joining the MamaBake movement is free, but to receive a full access to all the recipes on the website, they charge a nominal fee of $19.90/year.

III.   It is sustained by connective logic

MamaBake enables like-minded mothers to connect online in order to create real life support groups. However, unlike environmental groups which subscribe to the collaborative consumption logic, the MamaBake participants are largely like-minded for pragmatic, rather than ideological, reasons. This lack of explicit ideology lowers the threshold for participation for mothers. That is not to say that it is completely free from ideology, however. To start with, Michelle Shearer's articulated goal has definite feminist undertones, with her recognising the disproportionate burden of housework that was falling on women, and devising a strategy so that women would have more time to spend on things they find more enjoyable.

Similarly, as noted before, much of the collaborative consumption activity is based on the ideology of downshifting or simplifying life, as well as the desire to live more environmentally sustainable ways. While the core act of MamaBaking – small local groups cooking together – does not directly reflect these ideas, over time the online content, both on the website and the various social media sites, has more explicitly referenced these values. For example, in 2014, MamaBake did a series of blog posts

under the pseudonym 'Frugal Frannie', with topics ranging from food, to school supplies, home remedies, relationships, and doing craft on a budget (mamabake.com, accessed August 2015). The point here, however, is that by not committing to a one single ideology, as in the case of collaborative consumption for advocacy, MamaBake is able to use a diverse range of action frames and, thus, attract a wider range of participants than a single groups based on a single ideology. This is of course made easier by the very nature of social media, which enables the frequent posting of memes and other short messages, thus providing varied content, often in a light-hearted manner.

This is also reflected in the real life cooking groups, with Shearer quick to point out the autonomy of the MamaBake groups: "I don't give them that much guidance because if they are established groups, they get it, they are doing it. There's no message here [The MamaBake HQ], they're *doing* the message (Shearer, July 2013, my emphasis). She further highlighted this as a central aspect of the whole MamaBake movement: "…we just want to give people resources to go out and do it themselves. We are not trying to create a big homogenous mass. We want them to go out there and start thinking."

To an extent, this personalised logic is not inconsistent with the neoliberal character of other forms of collaborative consumption, but it also has the capacity to bridge the gap between the personal and the collective. Despite the fact that food, in general, is a highly political topic in terms of production, distribution and consumption (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008), it is hard to think of any topic that could be more quickly dismissed as belonging to the 'private' sphere, than cooking dinner for your family. However, as Giddens (1994: 17) notes, the democratic power of self-help groups comes from their ability to open up spaces for public dialogue where there previously were none, or they were suffocated by traditional practices, a notion which has obvious resonance with MamaBake. In addition, so as not to overstate the distinction between the traditional economy models and the social forms of the practice, it is important to note that, in the case of MamaBake, the collaboration is to a certain extent a direct response to the neoliberal conditions. The sole reason the movement exists is because women, and in particular mothers, are still not adequately supported in the society, and the unequal sharing of the domestic labour has the potential to confine women in the domestic shackles.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated the need to pay attention to the different varieties of collaborative consumption. The first part mapped the various manifestations of the movement beyond the well-known profit-driven models. This article then explored new ways of being social, which are not easily counted or tracked, and which do not constitute an automatic source of economic value to either the founder of the movement, or the participants. This is significant because it shows the possibilities of collaborative consumption, but also its limits. While it can be a space apart from neoliberalism and conceptualise alternative social arrangements, like big batch baking, it also occurs primarily because social welfare has been privatised, and domestic work is still largely gendered, requiring mothers to find alternative ways of supporting themselves. Therefore, it is not accidental that MamaBake originated and gained most popularity in Australia, where social support is limited. There are certainly aspects of the collaborative consumption movement, and in particular the ideological and social forms promoting grassroots activism and communal values in general, which should be viewed as positive in an era often characterised as individualistic and profit-driven. However, we should also exercise caution and not over-exaggerate its separation from the traditional market approaches, as to a certain extent it is always taking place as a response to the wider societal constructs. It is hard to imagine groups such as MamaBake taking off in Scandinavian countries for example, where the social support is generally provided by the state and individuals are not as reliant on themselves and their immediate communities.

As a final note, it is important to consider a fuller picture of collaborative consumption, one which points at collaborative consumption as a dynamic practice, and allows to imagine alternative social arrangement. These include using different currencies which go beyond products and services into intangible benefits such as time and a sense of community, as well as the shared norms of the exchange. It shows the multiple ways in which people can organise socially without a shared ideology or a collective goal. This is of course a prominent feature of social media technologies, which enable people to

create wide connective personalised networks around issues important to them. As such, while recognising the boundaries set by the broader structural context of politics and neoliberalism, the values that drive the new manifestations of social practice, provide a much more positive general outlook to the society as a whole than the narrow focus on the market practices would allow on their own.

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You can be a feminist and bake your cake too: Expressions of choice and domesticity online

Abstract

The increasing popularity of domesticity, and in particular tertiary-educated women's decisions to leave the workforce to care for their family, has raised several concerns amongst feminist commentators. Some argue that it is a direct result of the romanticisation of motherhood, which has occurred at the same time as neoliberal policies have weakened state support for families, while others argue it undermines the women's movement. This research analyses MamaBake, an Australian cooking group for mothers, which on the surface appears to promote gendered domesticity, and the expressions of choice and feminism as understood by its participants on social media. It combines a content analysis of the group's Facebook discussion page with an in-depth interview with the group's founder, and argues that the reasons for making domestic decisions are complex and compatible with feminism, and these are not currently reflected in the dominant representations of mothers in media and broader public discourse. It contends that small fragmented groups such as MamaBake should be considered as one of the strengths of modern feminism, allowing increased representation of women in areas often ignored otherwise.

You can be a feminist and bake your cake too: Expressions of choice and domesticity online

Introduction

> No woman should be authorized to stay at home to raise her children. Society should be totally different. Women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many will make that one. It is a way of forcing women in a certain direction.
>
> (de Beauvoir, in Friedan, 1976: 397)

Simone de Beauvoir responded to Betty Friedan in this way when discussing the possibility of offering monetary compensation to stay-at-home parents in order to safeguard their future and retirement. Over the years, and perhaps to de Beauvoir's dismay, the rhetoric of choice has continued to feature heavily in the feminist debate (McCarver 2011), with Hirshman (2005, 2006) coining the term 'choice feminism' to reflect liberal feminists' attempts to include groups such as mothers. In recent years, and in part fueled by the internet and social media, the topic has once again been brought to the fore, with one journalist arguing that we are now witnessing a "new cult of domesticity, with a new breed of housewife at its helm" (Carlton, 2013). On the surface, the debates appear to follow a familiar logic, emphasising the value of work, rather than staying at home, and the repercussions of these 'choices' for the women's movement and equal rights, and, indeed, for the broader society in general (Hirshman 2006; Summers 2013). The nuances of the debate, however, have shifted. Many narratives constructing the new stay-at-home parent no longer present her as an oppressed housewife, but, rather, as an active agent of her own life, for whom domesticity is an individual choice from a smorgasbord of options. The neoliberal connotations of such a conception of choice, associated particularly with white, middle-class women, are hard to ignore. While the 'Mummy Wars' of the previous decades

largely centered around children, and in particular perceptions about the ideal ways of bringing them up, the new middle-class ''yummy mummies'' (Littler 2013, McRobbie 2013, Summers 2013) are also choosing their lifestyles to fulfill their own desires. And, unlike Friedan's isolated suburban housewives of the past, the 'Housewife 2.0' is connected to others online, via blogs, websites, discussion forums or social media (Carlton 2013).

The ''yummy mummy'' is of course but one depiction of parenting ideals, with the internet in particular enabling more varied expressions of motherhood. However, the increasing popularity of domesticity does raise several questions. Are these expressions of domesticity compatible with feminism, or are they a sign of a post-feminist regression? To what extent do these decisions reflect a real choice, free from structural constraints? And, more broadly, who is allowed to identify as a feminist? With many concerns being raised about the state of feminism, and the movement's lack of collective power in the era of aggressive individualisation (McRobbie 2009), such questions gain particular importance.

While no single research project could offer definite answers to these questions, the Australian big-batch cooking group for women, MamaBake (www.mamabake.com), offers a fascinating starting point. On one hand, on the surface at least, MamaBake seems to embody elements of regression. Its main concern is to get women to do their cooking together in order to lighten their workloads; it presents women as the care-givers in charge of domestic duties, and many of the memes it posts on its social media pages reference the images of the quintessential 50s housewife (though most often these are used ironically). On the other hand, and as often articulated by MamaBake, the movement was not borne out of the love for cooking, but rather as a response to the prevailing social conditions in Australia, which see women doing the majority of the domestic chores, regardless of their work status (Jericho 2014). In other words, their aim is to liberate women from the domestic shackles, or at least provide a way of working around the problem; ironically by promoting the very activity that is part of the problem. MamaBake's hybrid online/offline nature adds another layer to the analysis, as online feminism has been shown to have a significant impact to the way in which feminism is generally understood (Harris 2008).

Using the MamaBake group as a case study, this article focuses on two questions. How do MamaBake participants, and in particular those who have made home-centered choices, understand and negotiate domesticity in relation to feminism? Is it an individual choice, signifying the successes of the feminist movement, or a neoliberal fantasy, sabotaging any hope for gender equality? The second, broader, question focuses on the MamaBake group as a whole. Can a group that promotes domesticity be considered feminist, or is it indeed a sign of regression and a consequence of oppressive right wing politics? What is the message that the MamaBake group is trying to convey and what broader insights can it generate with respect to the shape and direction feminism takes? These questions are explored through an analysis of a Facebook discussion thread, and an in-depth interview with the founder of the group, Michelle Shearer.

To set the context for a discussion about choices and domesticity in relation to feminism, the article first explores the discourse of motherhood, focusing in particular in the recent 'yummy mummy' phenomenon, given its prevalence in public discourse, particularly in mainstream media regarding domesticity. The second section will expand this discussion by focusing on the rhetoric of choice in the context of post-feminism. Finally, I will highlight the multiple ways in which MamaBakers conceptualise choice, and argue that the reasons for making decisions, which seemingly imply domestic preferences, are complex and do not reflect the dominant simplistic representations of mothers presented in the media. More importantly, I argue that, rather than signaling the end of feminism, groups and websites such as MamaBake have a purpose far beyond a simple cooking and parenting community. In the era of social media and the 'vocal many', the fragmented nature of small groups such as MamaBake should be considered as one of the inherent strengths of modern feminism, bringing people together where they feel inclined to do so, without the need for one big collective movement. As such, I offer a more nuanced version of the choice argument, one which acknowledges that the right to choose is indeed compatible with feminism, and a goal worth striving for, while rejecting the dominant, neoliberal characterisation of domesticity, with a hot, desirable mother-figure at its core.

Putting the yummy in the mummy: The neoliberal motherhood fantasy

Given the gendered focus of the debates regarding domesticity, and the way in which the concept of choice is mostly framed in relation to women (Carlton 2013; Matchar 2013; Summers 2013), it is necessary to first look at the discourse of motherhood in order to understand the context of these debates. That is not to say that men and fathers should be excluded from the debate, quite the opposite, and I will return to this point later. However, since the motherhood ideals have been argued to be a strong contributing factor for women making domestic choices, it stands to reason that the ideals need unpacking. In the last two decades we have witnessed an increase in the romanticisation and fetishisation of motherhood (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Littler 2013). The early depictions of this trend included the highly mediatised 'mommy wars', with its polarised views of the stay at home mothers vs the working mothers. The motherhood ideal during this time was characterised by what Douglas and Michaels (2004) termed 'new momism', involving romantic notions of motherhood and expectations that women devote themselves completely to their children.

While motherhood remains persistently romaticisised, the narratives of the ideal mother have changed. One of the most enduring, popular depictions of idealised motherhood in the media in recent years is that of the 'yummy mummy'. The 'yummy mummies' are the modern day version of the woman who 'has it all'; they possess high levels of agency and appear to be in charge of their own careers and their family. The 'yummy mummies' present an opposing persona to the dowdy, asexual mothers of the past; they are well-groomed and sexually attractive, self-governing subjects responsible for regulating themselves (Littler 2013). McRobbie (2013: 119) equates the rise of the 'yummy mummies' with the new momentum of the political right, noting their careful claiming of progressive heterosexual womanhood in recent years:

> This new 'maternal-feminine' subject has its roots in neoliberal feminism. She is slim, youthful middle-class woman, an equal partner in marriage and compared favorably to her "less advantaged, low income, single parent counterparts".

It is easy to see the appeal of the 'yummy mummy' narrative. In reality, however, their characterisation is extremely limiting, offering only one type of aspirational figure; hot, well-groomed and ultra-feminine, a desired object, rather than the desiring subject (Littler 2013). In addition, these ideologies and myths of women as natural mothers and carers, or what Choi et al. (2005: 168) call 'myth versus reality discrepancy', are, of course, highly problematic, and can lead to a conflict when women inevitably can't meet the ideal. Similarly, Lopez (2009) argues that the whole concept of being a mother is overwhelming, and imbued with failure. The simplistic representations in the media, combined with the society's strict sets of rules and expectations about 'good parenting', have led to women going to greater efforts to portray themselves as supermums and wives, unwilling to ask for help, for the fear of being seen as bad mothers (Lopez 2009, Choi et al. 2005).

At the same time, it is clear that motherhood, socially constructed as a critical aspect of femininity (Stoppard 2014), remains a topic persistently separated from the public sphere. Like McRobbie (2013), Littler (2013) associates the 'yummy mummy' ideologies with the rise of the right wing politics, arguing that they occurred at the same time as neoliberal policies have weakened state provided childcare, rendering it into a private sphere issue. Similarly, the abundance of many motherhood neologisms in the social media age, such as 'mumpreneur'[10] and 'momager'[11], can be seen as symptomatic of the domestic fantasy, in which mothers exchange the career in the public sphere for working part-time or working from home, thus foreclosing the possibility of finding more equitable parenting solutions (Littler 2013). The main point here is that the gendered neologisms are yet another example of the exclusion of mothers from the public sphere. The branding of women based on their parental status, regardless of the size and success levels of their business ventures, sends a clear message: mothers are just dabbling in business, while their main focus is on the domestic level.

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[10] Mum who launches her own business after having children
[11] Mum who acts as a manager to her own child/ren, most often in the entertainment industry.

As we can see from the discussion above, the media representations of mothers are as problematic as they are simplistic. In this context, internet and social media at least have the option of presenting more varied representations of motherhood, as they form a part of complex media systems in which audiences are also content producers (Gabriel 2016). Indeed, discussion forums, such as the hugely popular Mumsnet in the UK, are offering spaces for new forms of femininity to emerge online (Pedersen and Smithson 2013), and, more generally, we have witnessed a proliferation of socially-mediated cultures of creative production in traditionally feminine domains such as parenting (Duffy and Hund 2015; Hewett 2006). Popular discourses about these social media platforms often describe them as economically empowering for women (Duffy and Hund 2015). However, Duffy and Hund (2015: 1) note that these discourses can be ascribed to "assumptions about the merits of highly individualised, flexible employment conditions, especially for female workers aspiring to combine professional and domestic responsibilities".

In this vein, even though mothers now form a significant part of the blogosphere, with the most popular 'mummy blogs' attracting more than 50,000 hits per day, the title 'mummy blogger' can both compliment and demean at the same time, with many bloggers in this category feeling marginalised by others, because of their focus on the personal level (Lopez 2009). However, while the mum/mom/ mummy titles are not unproblematic, we should not throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater and completely discredit them, as they also have the potential to serve an important purpose. Lopez (2009), for example, argues that blogging about the everyday, mundane things is a radical act precisely because it creates a different picture of motherhood than depicted in the mainstream media. Shaw (2012) also notes the importance of online discursive activism for critiquing the ideologies of mainstream discourses, and argues that blogging in modes that do not reproduce the concerns of mainstream media is, in itself, a 'political' strategy. Indeed, Rowe et al. (forthcoming) conceptualise politics as taking place both in the private and the public sphere, and argue that the two function iteratively. In addition, negatively coded terms such as 'girl' are often "reappropriated in an ironic stance in order to express new amalgamations of contradictory feminine subjectivities" (Budgeon 2011: 280). However, regardless of the 'mummy' status, what

arises from these notions of motherhood, is the question of agency and 'choice', whether perceived or real, and how it fits in with feminist theories, issues to which I now turn.

"I choose my choice! I choose my choice!": What's choice got to do with feminism?

The famous line from the cult television series *Sex and the City* (S04E07), and the battle cry of domestically-inclined women who wish to retain their feminist identity, amply demonstrates both the contradictory attitudes towards domesticity, and the neoliberal roots of the choice rhetoric. Disappointed by her career-oriented friends' disapproval of her decision to leave the workforce after getting married, Charlotte ends up screaming the words over the phone to her friend Miranda, a partner at a law firm, who is later portrayed juggling parenthood with a busy career. Charlotte herself, of course, is a poster person for conservative housewives; married to a wealthy doctor, her ability to make such choices is not hampered by financial considerations.

McCarver (2011: 21) notes that the rhetoric of choice and feminism are often conflated, with choice seen as signaling the successes of the feminist movement. She argues that the conflation is problematic as it "distances feminism from meaningful politics, neglects consideration of the link between personal practice and political implications, and dismisses feminism as superfluous and passé" (McCarver 2011: 27). This has become increasingly evident in online feminism, the rhetoric of which has become inseparable from popular culture, and which repeatedly evokes liberal feminist notions, such as equality, choice and freedom, and has been widely become linked to post-feminism and neoliberal ideology (du Couldray 2011; Gill 2007).

Much has been written about apolitical post-feminism (McRobbie 2009), which has been criticised for focusing too much on the topics of the personal, and not addressing 'real' feminist issues, such as equal pay and affordable childcare (Butler and Desai 2008). Other recent research also suggests that young women in particular, see feminism as anachronistic, with many of its goals already having been achieved (Scharff 2012). Similarly, a study of young Australian women found that they resisted the term feminism, as they viewed it as being synonymous with analysing the systemic structural

constraints, which limit 'choice', 'individual freedom' and 'rights' (Hughes 2005). In addition, Hakim (2006) has suggested that, while there are now many more choices available to women, many still make 'home-centred' choices, thus revealing their true preferences. In contrast, McRobbie (2009) believes that young women are often gender-aware and know that inequalities still exist, but now live in an era where feminism is replaced with 'aggressive individualisation', in which problems should be solved individually, rather than collectively.

As is clear from the discussion above, one of the big problems with any discussion of feminism and domesticity, concern the multiple, often contradictory, ways in which people understand the concept. Discussing the emerging 'mothers' movement', Hewett (2006) argues that feminist mothering has largely been either forgotten or misunderstood, so the term 'feminist' has come, erroneously, to signify women seeking individual liberation through equality in the workplace, and not through care-giving, thus alienating some mothers from feminism. Others (Hausegger 2005, Gilbert 2008) have gone further, and directly blamed feminism for valorising work, at the expense of family. Although there have been several attempts to be more inclusive, these have not gone uncontested, with Hirshman (cited in Gilbert 2008: 110) in particular critical of the choice rhetoric, arguing that "the family - with its repetitious, socially invisible physical tasks - is a necessary part of life, but allows fewer opportunities for full human flourishing than public sphere like the market or the government".

Of course, Hirshman's stance is elitist, without any explicit attempt to address the question of privilege, given those extolling the virtues of work are often in positions where they have more control over their work conditions, and occupy roles which offer more opportunities for enjoyment and empowerment (Hooks 1984, Gilbert 2008). In this context, Gilbert (2008) assesses the question of choice in terms of feminist expectations, market demand and policy options, and argues that, since the 1960's, women's choices about childrearing and paid employment have been made in a social context heavily stacked against motherhood, regardless of their individual needs and predilections. His proposed solution to the problem - an alternative policy option providing a sequential approach to work and family life so that mothers can invest their "labor entirely in child-rearing activities during the preschool years and then moving

into employment" as their children go to school (Gilbert 2008: 6) - has some merit and, indeed, would appeal to some women.

However, there are some significant issues with his analysis. Firstly, as aptly noted by Hyde (2009: 20), Gilbert builds a 'straw-woman' account of feminism as the producer of messages extolling the virtues of work and 'having it all', and promoting the drudgery of domestic chores, ignoring the vast amount of work already done by feminists in this area. He insists on framing his work as a 'women's issue', with the choices of men and fathers glaringly absent. Finally, his account fails to acknowledge women's agency and capacity for critical thought. Gilbert follows the common debates regarding structure and agency, and argues that women's choices are constrained by the structured inequality they face, but their actions are also shaped by prevailing social norms and values. Critics of Gilbert are not claiming that those constraints don't exist, or that the there aren't any problems with the choice rhetoric, quite the opposite. However, they wish to avoid utilising simplistic notions of 'women as carers', rather critically evaluating the available evidence on more varied forms of motherhood. The next section discusses this issue, focusing upon MamaBake.

MamaBaking: Towards a feminist motherhood?

Introducing MamaBake

MamaBake (www.mamabake.com) is a community group for mothers, founded by Michelle Shearer in early-2010 in NSW, Australia. It aims to establish local groups and bring mothers together to do big-batch cooking in order to lessen their burden of domestic tasks, and give them free time for other things they may find enjoyable. The actual activity of MamaBaking is largely user-driven: MamaBake provides information on the logistics, but leaves it up to the members to find and establish their groups. To assist those outside existing networks, MamaBake occasionally posts 'shout outs' on Facebook looking for people in particular areas, and it has also established several regional groups on Facebook, so that people can find others in their local areas. Although the actual MamaBaking is a real life, local activity, it is also a hybrid

online/offline group with a very strong social media presence, and its online community is particularly important for those who cannot participate in real life MamaBaking (Rowe 2015). On the surface, MamaBake appears to promote gendered domesticity. It has a large following, though the exact numbers are impossible to quantify (Rowe 2015), and as such it can be seen as a cause for concern by those who argue against women making home-centric choices. Consequently, MamaBake offers an interesting snapshot into the way in which some modern women negotiate domesticity and position themselves in the context of feminism.

Methods

The data for this research is drawn from a bigger sample collected over a two-year period. It situates MamaBake's discourse on motherhood in the broader socio-political context in Australia, and explores the ways in which MamaBakers discuss domesticity and the rhetoric of choice – that is, how they understood and expressed their ability to make choices, and how they related these to the wider world - on a Facebook conversation thread. Purposive sampling was used to select a conversation thread that best illustrates the ways in which MamaBake participants understand feminism and the rhetoric of choice. The conversation thread was started by MamaBake, and the discussion was free-form with no-one directing the flow.

As noted by Pedersen and Smithson (2013), the internet research community is divided about informed consent and the ethics of using such material. Contacting each individual user separately would not have been possible, as some users' privacy settings do not allow messages from those who are not 'friends' with them on Facebook. However, the posts MamaBake makes are in the public domain and can be accessed, even without an active Facebook account. This particular project was approved by the researcher's university ethics approval board, and all personal identifiers were removed from the responses prior to coding.

The thread contained 115 responses to the original post made by MamaBake (n = 116). All responses, including the original post, were coded thematically and divided into

categories emerging from the posts. Five categories were identified: choices; domesticity; feminism; financial independence; and career. 'Choices' was the largest category with 51 explicitly referencing the concept of 'choice' in their response. The analysis was complemented by an in-depth, individual interview with the founder of the group, Michelle Shearer. The interview allowed me to go beyond the user-generated data on Facebook and establish a fuller picture of the community group.

Results

On 28 April 2013, MamaBake posted a link to a newspaper article entitled *The retro housewife* (Carlton 2013)*.* The article posited the question 'Why are smart women swapping boardrooms for bunting and bake-offs?' and discussed the trend for domesticity to be increasingly viewed as appealing and something to be aspired to. MamaBake noted that "some feminists are calling it self-sabotage of the women's movement" and asked people to share their views on the matter.

The responses drew a large range of opinions on both choice and feminism. For many, the concept of choice was seen as intrinsic to feminism: "The basis of feminism is choice. Women having an equal right to men to choose. Choose who to vote for. Choose to work out of the home or to raise children. A true feminist family is one where both partners are able to choose equally what shares they take in raising the family, maintaining the home and generating the income" (comment #43). Another one noted: "Surely the women's movement was about choices: the choice to work or not, to receive a fair wage and to enjoy equal recognition in society. One of these choices is to stay home for a few years to raise children" (#20). However, there was also a recognition that the choices were shaped by system conditions, and general acknowledgment that the choice argument is often misguided, with many mothers not having a true choice in the system, for financial reasons and lack of affordable child care, among other things. The concept also aggravated some:

> It is a bit rich that some folks think we have real 'choices' in this system. Oh
> gee, I can 'choose' to stay at home and be relegated to second class citizen or

I can 'choose' to pay someone else (likely another woman) what is virtually chump change to raise my children so I can 'choose' to work in a system that refuses to pay me equally whilst I also 'choose' to maintain a household for free. Yay, choices. #18

However, not everyone agreed with the conflation of feminism and choice: "it's important to remember that feminism isn't about 'choices'. It's about dismantling the system that relegates women to second class" by suggesting that what is traditionally referred to as 'women's work', is not of any value (#5). One person argued that people were calling themselves feminists, even though they had not read any feminist theory. She further contended that 'real' feminists believe that women's liberation from this oppression comes from not allowing a system that works off women's backs. This view was supported by another respondent, who noted that: "It is absolutely about having the power to make choices AND to not be disadvantaged in those choices, but unfortunately the latter is where we stumble due to a whole bunch of structural issues" (#29). Another respondent disagreed, arguing that: "feminism hasn't got one definition. There are many kinds. I really don't think any one group of women can define feminism and invalidate other women's definitions. For some women, feminism is about choices, for others it is about dismantling a system. Some women just want more participation in the system, not to dismantle it entirely" (#25).

MamaBake founder Michelle Shearer (personal interview) similarly noted the fact that lack of ability to choose manifests differently to different people, and domesticity was not always driven by a true choice:

Australia is very traditional in that sense that men are out to work and women are staying at home. But it is like that because we have no childcare. Or childcare is so bloody expensive that why would I go back to work because the childcare puts me into negative for my bloody income. So how's that supporting women going back to work? … That is sabotage. That's societal sabotage.

Several commenters also argued that having the choice of domesticity was not unproblematic, resulting in lack of financial independence, missing out on superannuation[12], and the long-term implications of these. One such respondent also acknowledged the fact that many MamaBakers are themselves in a privileged position:

> I think the issue of intergenerational poverty and disadvantage needs to be raised. If mothers (or any parents for that matter) become single parents and have made a choice to disengage from the workplace/career they are potentially disadvantaging their children by lack of working role model, as well as by lack of access resources, and being welfare dependent. Not all choices need to be made about what is the cost now, but what are the long term economic and social implications… Although perhaps this is not so relevant to the middle-class Facebookers.

Only a few respondents explicitly noted the roles of men and fathers: "I think this is a feminist issue as long as men who want to be stay at home dads are not given the same opportunities." While another poster advocated for equal parental leave as one solution for addressing the gender imbalance:

> As a feminist, I would like to see paternity leave that is equivalent to maternity leave and men able to explain gaps in their resume with "I was raising children" without that being viewed negatively. Couples could then make choices based on their individual strengths and not on their gender.

The general discussions of feminism highlighted the multiple ways in which different mothers had internalised the term. It is easy to see where the disagreements and confusion regarding the correct usage of the term arises. Unlike the feminists of the past who argued for the right to work, the MamaBake women were discussing whether they had the right to stay at home. The MamaBakers equated choice with freedom and agency, although the extent to which these were perceived possible to achieve varied. Some simply acknowledged the contributions of the women's movement's to their own living arrangements, and evoked notions of post-feminism suggestion to movement had

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[12] Payment made by the employer towards pension in Australia

already reached many of its goals: "I'm a stay at home Mum and that is what I choose to do...I'm grateful to all the feminist who toiled so that I can vote!" (#45). Others argued that "any reference as to what women 'should' be doing makes it just as oppressive as the patriarchy they're railing against!" (#4), while some associated feminism with promoting the value of paid work, over the domestic:

> It makes no sense to me that 'feminists' peg the value of womanhood at working jobs (that ultimately just make money for other people) and trying to constantly prove you're better than a man in a 'man's world'. It's divisive and that attitude is what is really sabotaging the feminist movement.

One commenter refuted the idea that feminism was against domesticity, noting that the problem was instead structural: "It's troubling how many of us have been successfully led to believe that feminism is against us, especially those of us who do appreciate raising our children and feel happy in 'traditional roles'. Honestly, one of the main reasons women are in 'traditional roles' is because men are still earning more than we are in the same capacity" (#20). Concerns were also raised about the backlash against feminism and the subsequent lack of collective action to fight the system. Many commenters rejected the simplistic notion of domesticity signaling the 'downturn in women's ambitions', instead noting the difficulties in trying to return to the workforce after a break, and advocating for the ability to take time off from paid work, without losing their qualifications while doing so. While this echoes Gilbert's (2008) suggestion about a sequential approach to combining family and work, instead of trying to have it all at once, the premise is significantly different. Gilbert not only blames feminism for idealising work over family, he also prescribes and generalises, instead of being open to other forms of both parenting and working; making his an inherently anti-feminist position.

This discussion is particularly relevant in the context of the MamaBake movement, as the group itself had also experienced similar issues regarding definitions of feminism, and the different ways in which people understand them. MamaBake demonstrates an identifiable feminist consciousness through the posts it makes, yet its feminist position has been challenged. Shearer (personal interview July 2013) notes that she had been a

devout feminist since her teenage years, but, since becoming a mother, she didn't feel valued and felt as though there were fewer opportunities available, even though she was highly educated. Indeed, part of the reason for starting MamaBake was to address these structured inequalities.

However, since establishing MamaBake, Shearer's feminist status had been questioned by a feminist commentator in Australia, which she attributed to that commentator's focus being too narrow: "The leading feminist groups are ignoring 30% of women. They call themselves leading feminist and talk for all Australia and call me Judas because I had kids. ... You don't represent me. You don't represent any of my friends, and you're missing out an enormous percentage of women." In her opinion, the media focus on young women was partly to blame: "they're the important ones, but as soon as you have kids, unless you're a MILF[13], you're invisible and not of any value." Shearer also acknowledges the possibilities that would arise if the situation was improved: "We [mothers] don't feature. We are probably more educated as a demographic, then women were 100 years ago and we're all sitting there at home. Imagine if that was harnessed."

Of course, one of the problems MamaBake is facing when it comes to its feminist status is directly related to its gendered nature, which is immediately obvious from the group name. It creates certain preconceived notions, and certainly runs the risk of perpetuating existing structured inequalities. Shearer herself was quick to point out that "people get the misconception that it is about being a domestic goddess, when it's actually doing this stuff so you don't have to do it". However, as noted earlier, even though motherhood and the various neologisms and terms assigned to mothers sometime carry negative connotations, they may also be used ironically to challenge status quo. Hewett (2006: 45) argues that 'mama' is to 'mother' as 'grrl' is to 'woman' – "it creates an alternative vocabulary that defines itself in opposition to restrictive notions of identity. 'Mama' suggests an attempt to redefine motherhood, a political project that begins for many third wavers in the realm of language and culture."

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[13] The acronym MILF stands for Mother I'd Like to Fuck, and was popularized in the late 90s by the movie American Pie.

Discussion

The question of whether MamaBake is a feminist group is significant. When MamaBake positions itself in relation to feminism, it enables the articulation of new agendas. As noted before, the media focus on 'yummy mummies', or MILFs as Shearer argued, has functioned to privilege certain narratives, while making others invisible. The crucial distinction here is that MamaBake is not attempting to speak for all women, or even for all mothers. Rather, it acknowledges that there is a lack of representation beyond the overtly sexualised stereotypes. MamaBake's representation of mothers do not promote the transformation of the self into a desirable character such as 'yummy mummies', unless one counts the newfound acceptance of motherhood and all it entails as a transformation of sorts. There is no need for redemption, what already exists is good enough. In essence, MamaBake rejects the ritual abjection of mothers as lower beings, while simultaneously challenging the 'have it all' narrative. "Giving mothers a voice. I think it's important, I think it comes down to social isolation, and the super-mum myth that everyone else out there seems to be killing it. We try not to dwell on, I try not to put out the message of 'oh poor us, it's so hard'. We know it's hard, come over here and talk to us." (Shearer, personal interview).

Of course, it could be argued that, with the increasing popularity of Mummy Blogs, the representations of motherhood are also going to get more varied. However, it is interesting to note the way in which MamaBake addresses the question of personal matters, which are often seen as a central element of motherhood, and views MamaBake's approach as separate from these. Gabriel (2016) argues that the vast number of blogs are personalised and fulfill an essential element of human desire for the expression of identity and creating a community. The resonance between this and the MamaBake movement is significant. However, unlike the Mummy Blogs, which are often single-authored and where dialogue is restricted to the comment box, MamaBake's discursive structure online is marked by a sprawling dialogue between the page administrators and the participants who happen to be online at the time the post is made, and who feel compelled to respond to the original post. Shearer acknowledged

the significant influence popular bloggers have, but was also quick to point out their differences:

> Unless you're doing something extraordinary, I really have no interest in you putting your life out there. MamaBake is a movement, it's doing something, it's bringing about change and the way we're thinking, and it's happening and it's very real in how it's changing people's everyday existences.

In other words, Shearer distinguishes between pure discursive activism, and discursive activism used in conjunction with concrete action such as MamaBaking. She argued that while there are several forums in which women can talk to each other, doing domestic chores breaks-down barriers and cuts through small talk. Shearer noted that, initially, she had envisaged that MamaBake could create little feminist think-tanks, in which women could "pick apart the domestics and how we can smash it, and find a whole new way of doing things". This online/offline hybrid model creates a whole new platform for feminist action, in which the online functions facilitate communication on a wider scale, and the offline element – and the central theme of the MamaBake group – both helps empower individuals by giving them real life support in the realm of parenting, and helps validate their individual choices (Rowe 2015), while also highlighting the societal gender injustices. It is also interesting to note that, while many Facebook commenters referenced their individual right to choose their lifestyle without being judged by anyone else, Shearer's vision for ideal societies takes a significant step away from the extreme individualisation of which the third wave of feminism is often accused. For Shearer, community building is the way forward and a way to address underlying societal issues:

> When I grew up there was no such thing as community, it was all about the individual. And that's the problem, community has not been valued at all, and it has been going on for generations. I mean here we are as mothers, and there is no such thing as community. So we need to be creative

Thus, the overall problem is not, as Hirshman (2006) thinks, the fact that family life doesn't allow for full human flourishing the same way as paid work does, and making

such claims can only be done from elitist positions, while belittling the life choices of others. The problem, as articulated by many MamaBakers, is the fact that mothers are often doubly-oppressed regardless of their work status. In many cases childcare is either too expensive, or takes up most of the salary to make returning to work viable. For those who do return to the workforce, in Australia women still earn less than men across the board. Those who stay at home are not only viewed as sabotaging the women's movement, but they also risk their economic stability and financial independence in the future. What MamaBake offers is a new articulation of feminism, one, which doesn't view domesticity in relation to yummy mummies and right wing politics, the same way as McRobbie and Littler do. For MamaBake, domesticity is a valid option when it is a real choice, while at the same time they acknowledge that some women may be forced to make domestic choices as a direct result of neoliberal policies, which see women disadvantages in the work force. In other words, MamaBake acknowledges that the domestic sphere can indeed be problematic, but they don't buy into the wholesale idea of domestic life as being of lesser value than the public sphere. While they advocate for the individuals' ability to choose, this is not done at the cost of community as postfeminism would suggest. Rather, they want freedom from oppression and freedom from judgment, while being very much part of the wider community and society in general.

As such, the big question that remains is: where does this leave the women's movement? Is the fact that many women advocate for the right to stay at home, either for a few years or indefinitely, a sign of regression? The one aspect which most commenters agreed with was the fact that domesticity is indeed compatible with feminism, and that making those choices should not be considered as 'sabotage' – either to oneself, or the women's movement in general. The question that needs to be addressed here is that of representation. As Shearer noted, she did not feel that the leading feminists had been representing her or her needs accurately. However, that is not to say that the feminists or feminism in general are wrong or passé. Rather, it brings up the point that it is impossible for any one group to accurately represent everyone, and this is where we see the importance of groups such as MamaBake. It gives a creative outlet and empowers women who identify with this brand of feminism, without making claims about representing all women. As such, while it could be argued that by taking a gendered

stance, and by default excluding men and fathers, MamaBake ends up perpetuating the old gender stereotypes, the important thing to note is that MamaBake is not saying that men do not matter, or that they could not be the stay at home parents. What they are doing is addressing the problem at hand, which they feel able to tackle, rather than trying to solve all the problems and end up achieving nothing. Thus, it is important to not focus on 'all or nothing' approaches, but instead look at how to be inclusive of small groups which allow different groups of women to voice their needs and opinions, without subscribing into the neoliberal idea of choice equalling individuality and lessened state support in the areas where it is much needed.

In hindsight, de Beauvoir's words regarding women shouldn't be allowed to make domestic choices sound harsh, but she had a good reason for making such claims. Addressing such deep, structural inequalities has historically proven to be challenging, though not impossible. In the words of a MamaBaker:

> Feminism isn't finished, and I hope a lot of SAHMs[14] will reconsider what feminism truly means and start having some conscious-raising MamaBakes that discuss how valuable we really are and how we can be homemakers and feminists at the same time. We will win one day, but not as long as we keep buying into the backlash that suggests feminism is passé or doesn't represent who we are.

Conclusion

What we can learn from this small case study is that definitions of feminism continue to be contested, and, as such, there is disagreement even amongst those who self-identify as feminists regarding who is allowed to call themselves a feminist, and what the movement should be fighting for. It also highlights the way in which currently marginalised groups, such as MamaBake, can feel excluded from the mainstream narratives for the lack of accurate representation, and also because there is some resistance from other feminist commentators to accept the feminist identity of a group

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[14] Stay at home mother

dedicated to domesticity. While the MamaBakers demonstrate acceptance of domesticity as being compatible with feminism, perceptions of motherhood still continue to have exclusionary connotations, either seen as separate from the public sphere, or in the neoliberal context, offering agency only to those in the privileged positions able to make balanced choices. Consequently, MamaBake offers a more nuanced approach to feminism, one which does not signal a wholesale acceptance of the choice rhetoric. The fight for equality does not end in having a choice, since the very choice can still lead to disadvantaging certain people. Only when the choice can be made freely by not just mothers, but any other demographic as well, without negative consequences, can we say that feminism has reached its goals. However, it is clear that one group will never be able to represent the needs of everyone, and as such, the fact that the internet and the social media can offer a platform for smaller groups to focus on the issues they find important, should indeed be seen as one of the strengths of modern feminism. The big issue, and one outside the scope of this article, is how to bring the smaller groups together when the need arises to address major issues such as equal pay. Here, online networks and the possibilities it offers for connective action may be a solution, but overall the topic requires more attention that can be given to it here. Finally, the article concludes by cautioning against the elite-trap, which sees privileged groups talking for others, and denying the importance of their cause, and their alternative participatory repertoires.

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Conclusion

This thesis has explored alternative forms of political participation, focusing on a small Australian community group, MamaBake, aimed exclusively at mothers. It examined the interactive and iterative relationship between arena and process politics and argued that small groups, like MamaBake, which are normally seen as purely social, and belonging in the private sphere, do have political resonance and, as such, should not be ignored in the study of politics. Such claims are of course not entirely new, and have in particular become familiar in feminist frameworks often based on the mantra that 'the personal is political'. While there have been significant changes in the ways in which the concept of the 'political' is conceptualised overall, there is still a tendency to overlook the significance of the social sphere when it comes to discussing the citizens' engagement and, more broadly, the state of our democracy.

Yet, in recent years, there have been several developments, which necessitate the re-evaluation of the way in which we approach the topic, and which have paved the way for the key argument of this thesis: that the personal is not just political, but that the political is also increasingly personal.

First of all, the rapid increase in the uptake of social media tools and platforms for instant, multi-way, communication and new ways of social organising, by both formal organisations, as well as individuals themselves, has naturally influenced and impacted the ways in which people engage in both the private and the public sphere. Such developments have also contributed to the plurality of voices, and further blurred the boundaries between the private and public, with people taking to public forums to connect with others and discuss their previously private matters.

Secondly, there is little doubt that our society is marked by an increasing individualism, with large-scale, centrally-organised, institutions losing some of their foothold, and, as such, irrevocably changing the communication channels between ordinary citizens and those in the positions of power - the political elite. However, this thesis argues that such individualism doesn't automatically lead to a weakened democracy, as often suggested

in the extant literature, and can indeed be a positive development, enabling new type of engagement to take place instead.

As such, this thesis addresses two central questions.

- What are the key elements of participation in the small hybrid online/offline group, MamaBake?
- What does this mean in the context of the study of political participation in general?

To address these questions, I undertook a largely qualitative, mixed-methods, study, reported in four, interlinked journal articles. Each article focused on a specific element of the operation of MamaBake: the extent to which, and the ways in which, it can be regarded as 'political'; the ways in which we can distinguish political and social talk in a social forum; the collaborative nature of it as a community group, outside the market orientation; and the role of ideology – in this instance feminism – in the group.

Understanding MamaBake

Given that the study was divided into four individual journal articles, each article presented separate findings. The first article – *MamaBakers as Everyday Makers: 'The Political is Personal'* – found that Henrik Bang's Everyday Maker concept was also applicable in the social setting of MamaBake, with the MamaBakers exemplifying Bang's notion of reflexive individuals who are, indeed, actively participating in their local and virtual communities. It showed that, unlike traditional hierarchical, top-down organisations, the structure of MamaBake offered the participants a great deal of flexibility, and, as such, their participation took highly personalised forms, depending on their individual circumstances. However, the results from this study also challenged two of the characteristics of Everyday Makers identified by Bang: that participation is done largely for 'fun', reflecting an absence of duty norms; and that it is non-ideological. With regards to the former, while the participants expressed their desire to MamaBake because it was enjoyable, they simultaneously embodied elements of duty norms and acknowledged that the group had a very important purpose in society. The second point regarding Everyday Makers being non-ideological is particularly problematic when it

comes to MamaBake. While the premise behind the group – collective cooking - is certainly pragmatic in nature, the group also has definite feminist connotations. Consequently, the article posed the question of whether it's possible to define an activity as inherently feminist, while simultaneously calling it non-ideological. Overall, the article showed that, while the MamaBakers' participation is personalised, it is not done to simply advance the individuals' own circumstances, as many also expressed a strong desire to change society to reflect MamaBake's ideals of communality. As such, it challenged the idea that personalised politics automatically leads to a fragmented society characterised by individualism and self-interested citizens, and emphasised a more nuanced reading of the state of play.

The second article – *The Everyday Politics of Parenting: A Case Study of MamaBake* – addressed some of the methodological and theoretical problems associated with the process definitions of politics. It focused on political talk occurring in the social space of MamaBake's Facebook page, and, building upon Graham's framework for analysing political talk in social forums, argued that we need a new approach to identifying political conversations, and, as such, have to reconsider both where to look, and what to look for. Two reasons were identified for this: the plurality of voices online; and the increase in 'life politics'. The article argued for the need to expand the conceptualisation of politics to include occurrences such as everyday talk, but also responded to the concerns raised in the literature about conceptual stretching by using a coding framework and systematically analysing Facebook content to identify the instances in which talk was politicised. Through this analysis, the article demonstrated that social media has the ability to foster intelligent and valuable debate. It concluded by arguing that, as memberships and involvement in formal organisations decreases, it is necessary to include social media platforms such as Facebook in our analysis, as this small case study showed how such platforms can enable, and create, opportunities for public deliberation regarding issues of collective interest.

Having established both the characteristics of participation in MamaBake, as well as showing how systematic coding can alleviate some of the boundary problems associated with process politics, the third article – *Beyond Uber and Airbnb: The social economy of collaborative consumption* – identified MamaBake as a collaborative consumption

initiative, and focused on the social aspect of collaborative consumption. The article showed that, to date, collaborative consumption had almost exclusively been discussed in terms of its economic impacts, or, alternatively, as an ideology related to downshifting and environmental impacts. Using MamaBake as the case study, the article argued that such a conceptualisation missed the complexity of the phenomenon, and, as such, the concerns raised about collaborative consumption failed to adequately acknowledge the benefits of such initiatives, and the possibilities they could offer. The article developed a typology for collaborative consumption, identifying four broad, often overlapping, categories, orientated around the market, government; advocacy; and the social sphere. The article then focused upon the social level. It demonstrated that, as a social collaborative consumption initiative, MamaBake was characterised by value-oriented goals, with the currency exchanged includng both the cooked meals, and shared norms of reciprocity and good will, and the organisation being sustained by a connective logic. It concluded by noting that, by including the social forms of collaborative consumption into the enquiry, it was possible to challenge some of the overly pessimistic critiques of the market-focused approaches, and, as such, provide a more positive view of the society.

The final article – *You can be a feminist and bake your cake too: Expressions of choice and domesticity online* – focused on the underlying feminist ideology of the MamaBake group. Noting the criticism aimed by some feminists at the increasing domesticity, and in particular the romanticised ideals of mothering, involved in such organisations, the article focused on the ways in which MamaBakers understood and negotiated feminism in relation to domesticity, and how they related to the concept of choice, crucial to much contemporary feminism. The article demonstrated the plurality of opinions and arguments regarding both concepts, and argued that groups such as MamaBake should be viewed as one of the inherent strengths of modern feminism, allowing for more varied representation of people, in this instance mothers, than commonly presented in the mainstream media. As such, rather than being seen as a sign of regression, they enable more people to engage in feminism, and in projects they feel passionate about. The article also showed that 'choice' is a loaded concept, and viewed as such even by those who subscribe to idea of choice feminism which posits the idea that women should be free to do whatever they want without being disadvantaged by their choices.

As such, while it is compatible with feminism and a worthy goal indeed, the concept should be approached with caution in order not to downplay its impacts on those who are not in privileged positions and thus more easily able to make balanced choices.

Reflecting on our understanding of politics

Taken together, the results from these four articles suggest that the everyday lived experiences of people, in this instance mothers, can shift between the social and the private, and the public and the political spheres at any given time. As such, these findings strengthen the body of literature and the studies conducted previously, arguing for a broader conceptualisation of politics. It shows that, far from being apathetic, these mothers actively connect with others both online and offline, and take part in projects and initiatives important to them. While these projects do not necessarily have to connect with the formal political sphere, they do have political resonance and thus the value they provide should be acknowledged. As such, these findings are not just significant for those who study politics, but also the politicians who need to find a way to connect with the everyday citizens. This particular case study highlighted the fact that even a small group such as MamaBake can provide valuable insights into how people participate in groups and projects in an age when memberships in formal organisations are less prevalent than in the past. As such, it shifts the focus from a concentration upon overly pessimistic notions of declining participation rates to events that are actually taking place. This is of course not to suggest that such forms of participation are going to replace the formal modes associated with arena politics. Rather, it cautions against limiting our views of participatory practices to those that directly engage with arena politics, and, instead, reinforces the need to evaluate how contemporary, more varied, forms interact with, and complement, arena politics.

One such area, as highlighted in this study, concerns the role of social media. As the second article found, the social media platform provided by Facebook, and utilised by MamaBake, was able to foster rational public debate on topics relevant to MamaBake participants. By drawing attention to the fact that social media does not just involve inane talk, or even vandalism, as suggested by some politicians, the study demonstrated

that social media can have a purpose and function which goes beyond simply providing a space for social organising. Furthermore, it showed that even 'talk for talk's sake' provided opportunities for political discussion. These findings should be of particular interest both to those politicians who have subscribed to more negative conceptualisations of social media, and questioned its value in furthering public debate, and also to those who recognise the opportunities and possibilities provided by these spaces. While it goes without saying that social media enables politicians to engage directly with citizens, this study moved beyond such interactions and showed that the interactions between ordinary citizens are also important in their own right, and the study of this phenomenon could offer many insights for politicians and other people in positions of power.

When it comes to discussing the more varied forms of politics, the role of the market place, and the way in which both organisations and individuals orient themselves in relation to it, are often seen as providing the most effective means for alternative forms of participation. As such, there is an increased acceptance of the utility of methods such as boycotting in trying to change society. However, this study shows that such views are delimiting and risk overemphasising the market movements, while downplaying the significance of the social sphere. Yet, as we learnt from the third article, the social sphere offers opportunities for many other forms of organising, as was the case with the social aspect of the collaborative consumption movement, which has so far been less recognised in the extant literature. While not trying to influence policy, the function of the social level in the case of collaborative consumption is to influence societal practices, and it has the potential to contribute to the overall cohesion and wellbeing of the society. It also gives the normal, everyday people a means to influence their local communities, and as was the case with MamaBake, this can also take place at a national or international scale, depending on the reach and the appeal of the initiative. Therefore, it is important that we accurately identify and describe all aspects of the social practice, and not just those that are easily identifiable.

Naturally, what this means is that, in order to fully understand, describe and analyse, we need to stay open to groups, individuals and events, which may appear to be small and insignificant at first glance. Taking such an approach, automatically raises concerns

about drawing boundaries, and as we learnt from the case study, this is not unproblematic. In the case of feminism, in the past, the attempts to be more inclusive led to the conceptualisation of choice feminism, which has attracted a lot of criticism for diluting the overall purpose of the movement. Similarly, the attempts to expand our understanding of the political have led to criticisms about the concept turning into a study of everything, and subsequently losing its meaning. While this study argues for a more inclusive definition of the political, it does not do so at the cost of losing sight of theory and boundaries. The focus on the social and the everyday level does not mean that everything, from saying hello to the neighbors, to having coffee with friends, is politically significant and should be included in the study. Rather, it signals the fact that there are elements of the everyday practices that warrant more attention than is generally given to them, as the everyday citizens are connected and engaged, and can be politicised when the situation so warrants. In the case of MamaBake, this often happens when an external trigger, such as changes to the government's immunisation policy, or a petition against Facebook's stance on breastfeeding provokes a reaction from the community.

By paying attention to these small groups, we are able to highlight and develop an understanding of groups such as MamaBake, which helps us form alternative narratives of the society, and challenge the often somewhat simplistic mainstream narratives. The fact that MamaBake has resonated with many mothers, and gained attention from the mainstream media from the very beginning, can tell us important stories of the society before such information would otherwise have become common knowledge. What is it that drew women to embrace domesticity and communal cooking? If we were to get our information solely from sources such as the mainstream media, we would be likely to see MamaBake, at least in part, in the context of romanticised notions of motherhood. By placing MamaBake into its wider sociopolitical context, and collecting data from both the MamaBakers themselves as well as from the online discussions, the study was able to provide a more complete picture of the practice and challenge some of the mainstream assumptions. While the results from this study are not generalisable, it highlights the importance of unearthing the untold stories to keep challenging our current knowledge and theory.

Similarly, while MamaBake is, by its very nature, gendered, and approaches parenting from the point of view of mothers, this study demonstrated its significance to the women's movement in general. That is, while it may appear to be promoting the idea of women as caregivers, the reasons for doing so are complex, and women participate in it for several reasons. It is in these stories that challenge the mainstream narratives, no matter how small, that we can connect to the perceptions and the needs of everyday people. More broadly, while not the explicit purpose of this research, the brief analysis of the similarities between Bang's Everyday Makers, and Harris's conceptualisation of modern feminist participation demonstrates that there are significant overlaps in the two theoretical frameworks. Much of the other work on more varied forms of political participation has significant resonance with the feminist literature, which has for decades emphasised the importance of the personal in the field of political. While this thesis is not arguing that all new forms of participation are feminist in nature, it does suggest that there are lessons to be drawn from the feminist literature, which can, and should, be utilised in the study of politics, without having to reinvent the proverbial wheel.

This leads us to the question of how we approach concepts such as influence and impact. Here, as we have seen with this case study, it is not always possible to measure, or even estimate with any kind of accuracy, what the impacts of this particular activity might be. Yet, we have also established that it doesn't diminish the value of the practice, and it is necessary to broaden our gaze as to what counts as political. Closely listening in to conversations of women-only groups is a step towards this direction. This space is often disparaged as a non-political, private space but, as this thesis shows, this can also be a safe enclave for women to conceptualise and deliberate on pressing issues about domesticity, double shift, and social stigma. Therefore, it follows that we need to reconsider both how we describe the type of activity which doesn't aim to directly influence the formal political arenas and how we determine its worth. Is it something that should be done on a case-by-case basis, or are there some commonalities, which we can draw on? While this thesis cannot answer such questions, the overall implications of this case study are clear. Small studies and qualitative data have a lot to offer the study of Political Science, not replacing, but complementing, the big data available from other sources.

Finally, one of the most important questions that follows from this, is the need to re-evaluate the role of big government, as well as large interest-based organisations, which in the past acted as the intermediary, and connected ordinary citizens with the political elite. These questions have been posed before, and concepts such as connective action, which can be seen as either working in conjunction with, or, in some cases, replacing, traditional collective action, have been developed to describe how citizens may combine forces in the digital age to address issues of contention. In the case of MamaBake, such action has been evident in many cases pertinent to mothers, such as Facebook's ban of breastfeeding pictures. Simultaneously, concerns have been raised about the ad hoc, single-issue approach being too reactive, and thus being unable to systematically address the big, structural problems, such as gender equality for example. It should be acknowledged that such concerns do raise a valid point, and it is important to address them. One of the obvious strengths of online activism is the power of networks, and their ability to mobilise people. In such instances, the size of the individual groups themselves becomes less relevant, as the issue-based networks can gather enormous support without the constraints of time and place. However, the fact that it is now possible for groups, regardless of their size, to voice their opinions, is undoubtedly one of the positive developments at the time when large collective movements are not seen as relevant as they were in the past. That is of course not to say that everyone gets heard equally, quite the opposite, and the ability to gain visibility online is increasingly dependent on the individuals' ability to use the technologies appropriately, which may not always correspond with the inherent value of the topic. As such, the goal here is to continue to establish methods through which a more even representation and recognition of issues become possible. Such a topic is of course outside the scope of this case study, which sought to address some of these issues at a single-group level. MamaBake embodied many of these elements brought up in the extant literature, and, as such, helped to strengthen the case for the usefulness of the concept of process politics.

Contributions of this thesis

This study made four main contributions to the study of politics. First of all, it built upon and developed the concepts of life politics and the new type of political participant, the Everyday Maker. Second, it addressed some of the criticisms directed at the concept of process politics in the form of the boundary problem, and, building upon Graham's coding framework, it demonstrated how to systematically analyse Facebook. Third, it also developed a collaborative consumption typology, which pushes the literature to consider non-market forms of engagement. Finally, it contributed to the feminist literature by furthering our understanding of choice feminism in a manner which doesn't stretch the idea of inclusivity to the point where all categories become meaningless.

The literature on alternative forms of political participation is growing rapidly. No longer a niche concept, there has been a significant shift towards acknowledging the ways in which society has changed, especially as it relates to the rapid growth of digital technologies. However, two things need to be considered here, and the first point relates directly back to the case study of MamaBake. While we have a significant amount of literature on gender differences in political participation in general, mothers do not often feature as a demographic outside the feminist literature. This is perhaps not so surprising in Australia, when one considers the fact that, even the political parties and the media, tend to exclude mothers from the political sphere. Yet, it is becoming increasingly clear that, through the use of social media in particular, mothers wield a significant amount of power, and have the ability to influence opinion. Through the use of various social media platforms, they have the ability to network and connect to discuss, debate and address issues important to them. Furthermore, with the advent of such communication tools, mothers have increasingly also blurred the boundaries between the private and the public, bringing their everyday concerns into the public arena for collective debate. Given the limited representations of mothers in the mainstream media, such activity is increasingly important for this particular demographic. This study of MamaBake is of course not suggesting that mothers are a homogenous group, but, rather, it is drawing attention to the fact that these similarly situated actors are able to use their commonality to their advantage when required. This study highlighted in particular the way in which politics for MamaBakers often occurred in the private sphere, in conjunction of their everyday lives, and, as such, further

emphasised the need to focus on the interactive and iterative relationship between the social and the political.

The big problem with expanding our understanding of the political, as stated previously, is the question of where does the political end. Hay's conceptualisation of process politics provides one of the most thorough accounts of what differentiates process politics from topics, which are purely social. However, while he provides a good theoretical starting point, the problem in the social media age, when content is continuously produced, not just by different interest groups and organisation, but also by individuals around the world, is that it becomes increasingly difficult to identify where to look and what to look for if one is to venture outside purely political forums. Combining the theoretical approach with a systematic coding framework allowed me to distinguish the political content from the social content and general noise on the MamaBake's Facebook page. This thesis does not suggest that this is the only way to find political content on social forums, but the purpose of the article, and its contribution to the literature, was to strengthen the existing literature on process politics by demonstrating how the theory can be applied on a practical level, without turning politics into the theory of everything.

One of the most significant contributions to the literature comes from the third article, which developed a typology for collaborative consumption. So far the major focus on the concept has been on the impacts it has on the economy, and, as such, a comprehensive account of more varied forms of the practice was missing from the extant literature. The main focus of this article was on the social level, which to date has not been adequately addressed elsewhere. This is significant because it demonstrates the transformative ability of concepts such as collaborative consumption in the digital age, which has obvious resonance for the political research. Furthermore, it challenges the overly pessimistic readings of the current state of affairs, which focus on the negative impacts big business has on society, and shows that soft values, such as communality and helping others, can still be a driving factor for social organising.

Related to the concerns over the increasing individualisation of politics, are those raised about the state of women's movement and feminism in general. This thesis extended our

understanding of choice feminism by studying the concept of domesticity as articulated by the MamaBake participants and the founder of the movement. It highlighted the fact that, even in making personal and private choices, women are acutely aware of the structural constraints at the macro-level of society. However, whereas the previous literature has shown that young women in particular believe that issues can be solved at the individual level, this study showed that, while the mothers who participate in MamaBake are not homogenous and their reasons for joining may vary across the board significantly, they believed that the key to addressing some of the societal problems would be in forming local communities. Thus, this study shows that the negative impacts of individuality are often exaggerated and the loose structure of MamaBake can in fact model a way for feminism to move forward at a time when people are less likely to commit to a group or organisation for life.

Overall, this study challenged the prevalent market-orientation of much of the literature. The ill-effects of neoliberalism manifesting in the weakening of social welfare policies, as well as the opening of markets to predatory business models, which was discussed in relation to collaborative consumption, have contributed to the large body of literature dedicated to such concerns. However, while this study acknowledges the impacts of neoliberalism, in particular in that MamaBake was founded in part due to the lack of support infrastructure for parents in Australia, it also opens up a dialogue about the ways in which MamaBake often functions as a space apart from the market. The purpose of such dialogue is not to present a utopian society, in which no problems exist, but to challenge the increasingly negative readings of the self-interest individuals, keen to benefit from the state, but not to contribute to it. As such, it presents an alternative narrative, which focuses on the people's desire to build communities, address problems both collectively and connectively by utilising discursive activism online, use concepts such as collaborative consumption to benefit not just themselves, but also their immediate communities, and express a desire to keep advancing the women's movement, even though their understanding of what counts as feminism may differ.

Limitations and future research

The first obvious limitation relates back to the qualitative nature of this study. What is the value of a study of a small group such as MamaBake to the field of political studies as a whole, since the generalisability of the results is limited? As noted in the introduction, the purpose of this investigation is not to present an overarching, all-encompassing theory, but, rather, to focus on the mid-range theory by contributing to the literature on alternative forms of political participation. However, the issues regarding the generalisability of the results extend to MamaBake itself. The journal articles have covered specific aspects of the group, but the fluid nature of participation combined with the heterogeneity of the participants obviously limits the conclusions that can be made of the MamaBake group as a whole. As such, the point of this study is to highlight specific practices that can take place in groups such as MamaBake, without making assumptions about capturing the 'essence' of the group.

Similarly, while the research discusses 'mothers' as a soft demographic, it does not suggest that the participants possess a singular identity. Rather, as noted previously, it provides a broad frame within which people from diverse background can find communality. The small datasets of this research illustrate some of this diversity, but no claims can be made regarding all MamaBakers as a whole. Furthermore, given the fact that a large part of the data comes from online sources, concepts such as the class and ethnicity of the MamaBakers - while obviously highly relevant to the study of political participation - could not be incorporated in the analysis. Finally, as noted in the introduction, as a former member of the group, I, as the researcher, acknowledge that it is impossible to fully separate myself from the research. To address this, I have provided transparency by openly stating my position throughout the research, practicing continuous self-reflexivity to acknowledge any possible presuppositions, and allowed the conclusions to emerge from the data. It also has to be noted, that while MamaBake does have international reach, this research is situated in the Australian context, and as such, it is impossible to state the extent to which the results would resonate globally.

The research results also opened up questions, which, while important to address, were outside the scope of this study. One of the most important questions to address in the future, is how do we bring grassroots activism and 'big' politics together? How do we ensure that the plurality of voices are heard by those in the position of power, and, aside from direct interaction between individuals and politicians, what communication channels can be established between political institutions and less formal interest groups? Related to that, we also need to continue to identify ways to bring smaller groups together when the need arises to fight something collectively. Is networked, connective action enough on its own to ensure citizens have means to challenge and contest the rules and policies governing the society?

Finally, this study of MamaBake admittedly takes a celebratory tone of life politics and the Everyday Maker concept. However, it is possible that other examples of socially-oriented forms of participation also have a dark side. This is not within the purview of the study, but it is fathomable that these everyday activisms may also serve to disempower rather than empower citizens. Given the power of networked groups, such as mummy bloggers, there is also a significant potential to advance causes, which will go against government policy and/or best practice and directly harm people. Such questions are important and necessary to address in a separate project.

Overall, this thesis has provided a thorough analysis of a new type of social organising for women. It has shown that groups such as MamaBake are extremely complex and, instead of relying on the mainstream representations of mothers, require a thorough reading to accurately represent their activity. This thesis has defended the idea that small, everyday acts can be meaningful in the field of Political Science, as it is in these everyday practices – among other things – that groups such as MamaBakers engage with the wider society, and carve a space for self-representation. It does not suggest that we should abandon the traditional conceptualisations of politics, but, rather, sees them as inherently interlinked, providing spaces for new articulations of activism.

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