
Smartphones and Constructions of Motherhood

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ABSTRACT

In this position paper, I discuss how smartphones are implicated in contemporary constructions of motherhood, becoming participants in the childcare task. I present insights from my doctoral research, in which I explored the significant yet conflictive role of smartphones in family life.

BACKGROUND

Any internet image search of the term ‘working mother’ will produce a number of portrayals of women holding a baby with one hand and a smartphone or laptop with the other. Although put together in the same picture, these items are meant to symbolise two distinct roles: the infant represents the maternal identity; the device, the work persona. Motherhood, a socially constructed attribute of femininity [1] is commonly portrayed as one of uninterrupted devotion to children, with the smartphone often perceived as an intrusion into the world of motherhood and childhood. This is evident in feelings of guilt for using smartphones while looking after children [2, 7] or in the cultural shaming of maternal use of smartphones [3, 4, 5].

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KEYWORDS

Motherhood; smartphones; shared objects; research through design; role conflict

Figure 1: Example scenario

“Gina is on her maternity leave. She looks after her six-month old baby girl and her two-year old son. She uses the smartphone to regularly stay in touch with work but only when her son is not looking because he will otherwise start asking for it. Despite her rules about smartphones being off limits to children, she sometimes lets her son play with hers so she can breastfeed the baby.”

DISCUSSION

In my research, I developed a series of critical and experimental artefacts that were used as triggers for conversation around the use of smartphones during childcare [7]. The designs integrated smartphones and infant related objects such as toys, bottles or transitional objects [6], symbolising their presence in the realm of mother and child. Most responses towards these objects were of rejection to begin with, although upon further discussion there were recognitions of the smartphone’s role - either as a form of support or distraction for the mother or for keeping a child quiet or entertained. While generally perceived as an invasion into the organic world of mother and infant, a form of pollution that some felt their duty to protect their children from, the smartphone was also acknowledged as a form of empowerment and autonomy for the mother and as educational resource for the child, reflecting ambivalent attitudes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paulina Yurman is a designer and researcher in the final year of her PhD at Goldsmiths. Her research *Designing for Ambivalence* explores the role of smartphones for mothers and young children and is informed by critical design, feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives. She has developed a series of suggestive and experimental designs that dig into the significant yet conflictive role of smartphones during childcare and explore potentials for change. She used these designs to engage with audiences in discussions about motherhood and smartphones. Paulina was research associate in the Family Rituals 2.0 project, a collaboration between the Royal College of Art and Newcastle University. She has worked in the design industry and was senior designer at LEGO in Denmark. She is associate lecturer in design.

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