“We call it the square au pair.” Exploring working mothers’ experiences of using digital devices as ‘babysitters’.

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Abstract

Working mothers balance childcare, work, and household responsibilities whilst navigating a time of unprecedented digital innovation. Minimal guidance is available on managing devices, like tablets or smartphones, with their children. Devices can afford mothers time with prior research reporting devices being used as 'babysitters'. This UK study presents an in-depth account of working mother's experiences using devices as 'babysitters' with their 5–6-year-old children. Results are considered in relation to relevant literature exploring mothers' constructions of the 'good mother'. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provides a richer picture of lived experience and mean-making, missing from literature. Two super-ordinate themes are presented: 'Control' and 'Who am I as a mother in this new world?' The research found mothers still felt accountable to the intensive mothering ideology adding further challenges to device as 'babysitter'. This study adds depth to the existing knowledge base and can be used to inform guidance and aid development of appropriate services.

Key phrases: parenting in the digital age; interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA); mothering; digital babysitter; mother/child relationship

It is a time of unprecedented digital innovation. Parents are finding their way in navigating this new world of digital devices (DD) with many feeling that digital technology represents the greatest difference between their childhood and their children's childhood (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020). Advice focuses on screen time with the World Health Organisation (2019) and American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2020) recommending children under five limit screen time to an hour per day, with no advice for older children. Despite this, device use for children continues to increase (Ofcom, 2023) with children engaging with screens 50 minutes more per day during the Covid-19 pandemic compared to pre-pandemic usage (Ribner et al., 2021). With little professional guidance, parents are often faced with conflicting advice from mass media, educators, and other parents about how and whether they should manage children's device use. Advice is often judgemental and guilt-laden warning of impacts on mental health, physical health, and development. Although undoubtedly challenging for parents, mothers are often decision gatekeepers taking on most of the cognitive and emotional labour (Daminger, 2019) and spending more time on unpaid childcare (Office for National Statistics, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased pressures with inequalities in the cognitive and emotional labour disproportionately falling on mothers, which can be damaging to physical and emotional health (Dean et al., 2022).

The impact of navigating this new digital 'post pandemic' world is a challenge for today's mothers, children and society, and will likely impact future generations.

In this field, academic research spans three areas:

1. The impact to children's health focusing on either:
    a. pre-school age children, where development is highlighted (Chao et al., 2020, Herodotou, 2018; Kaur et al., 2019)
    b. adolescence, where focus is on social media and data privacy (Oberle et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2023).

2. Device use through parental mediation frameworks (De Morentin et al., 2014; Livingstone et al., 2017; Nikken and Janz, 2014).
3. Exploring parents' experiences of DD with their children (Bentley et al., 2016; Kostyrka-Allchorne et al., 2017; Sergi et al., 2017).

This final area, exploring parents' experiences of DD, is least researched, offering three themes: online risk versus benefit, focus on screen time and device as a 'babysitter'. Across the existing literature there is minimal research on mothers with most literature treating parents as a homogenous group.

Online risk versus benefit

Parents often balance risks against opportunities that DD bring children. The risks include safety, regulating behaviour, physical and cognitive development, and preparing children for the future (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020). Online safety is seen as a risk of differing levels. When interviewing parents with children aged 4-7 in rural towns of a southern US state, Sergi et al. (2017) found parents did not always feel in control of their children's viewing content due to unsolicited intrusions, such as free internet navigation, uncontrollable pop-up ads and unlimited use of entertainment apps, making them uneasy. In contrast Dias and Brito (2021), talking to parents of children aged 3-8 years old in Portugal, found that parents believed young children were protected because their digital behaviours were limited as they were not using social media. Parents placed more value on dialogue with their children rather than restrictions. Children however, interviewed within the same research, disclosed advanced digital skills stating they had been exposed to risks including watching pornography with friends, having nightmares due to age-inappropriate YouTube videos, or being approached by strangers when online gaming.

A UK study interviewing mothers with children aged 2-4 years old found some saw opportunities in DD allowing children to rest and relax or prevent disruptive behaviour (Bentley et al., 2016). However, evidence indicates using DD to counteract boredom may inhibit the ability to self-regulate behaviour and impact important interaction opportunities (Radesky et al., 2015). There are opposing parental views on physical and cognitive development with some believing excessive screen time may lead to obesity, addiction, elevated aggression, or impede social interaction (Bentley et al., 2016; Dias and Brito, 2021; Sergi et al., 2017), whilst others noticed increased dexterity and independence when children navigated touch-screen devices and development in cognition, memory, and social development (Kostyrka-Allchorne et al., 2017; Sergi et al., 2017). Overall, it is felt DD are a necessary and unavoidable part of life (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020), encouraged by schools who promote educational apps (Bentley et al., 2016). Parents are not only managing the here-and-now but place importance on the future; preventing DD use risks children being left behind at school and future workplaces (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020). This encourages parents to use them from an early age (Bentley et al., 2016; Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020). This limited research spanning eight years, across many countries and different aged children indicates a continual balancing of risk and opportunity for parents. This constant evaluation can leave parents unclear what is best resulting in unconfident decisions (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020). To reduce risks, and increase their confidence in doing the right thing, parents often exercise controls.

Focus on screen time

Parents often apply rules around device usage with ‘screen time’ most common (Bieke et al., 2016; Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020). Dias and Brito (2021) found restricting screen time was primarily due to concerns of excessive use which was detrimental to other activities.

These included physical activity, social interaction, and time in nature (Jago et al., 2018; Sergi et al., 2017). To ensure these activities were not impacted, restricting screen time was felt to be an easy measure of control. In particular, screen time gives parents with low digital literacy reassurance they are taking control (Dias and Brito, 2021). Two recent studies reference the struggle in keeping up with the pace of technological change with screen time being a go to. Jago et al. (2018), speaking to UK parents of children aged 8-9 years old, found they struggling to keep up in understanding the changing nature of technology. Dias and Brito (2021) similarly found parents of younger children lacked experience with DD leading them to restrict time. With limited guidance it is perhaps unsurprising that despite advice being aimed at younger children, parents see time control being one that is easy, with professional endorsement. Beyens and Beullens (2017) explored the impact of screen time, finding that parents who implement restrictive mediation on screen usage were most likely to experience conflict with their children, compared to parents enforcing lesser restrictions with co-use reducing conflict. Dias and Brito (2021) found that screen time controls often meant parents did not monitor or regulate content or activities, leaving children to use DD unsupervised, leaving them exposed to online risks.

Device as a 'babysitter'

Parenting is made easier with DD used as a 'babysitter' (Bentley et al., 2016; Dias and Brito, 2021; Eichen et al., 2021;), as 'shut-up toys' (Radesky et al., 2015), or even unconsciously giving DD a parenting role (Sergi et al., 2017). Parents state DD used in this way aid them in: doing chores, getting their own work done, sleeping longer, stopping children getting bored outside the home and keeping children calm (Bentley et al., 2016; Eichen et al., 2021; Sergi et al., 2017). Although UK data is limited, the Ofcom Children Media Literary Survey (Ofcom, 2023) suggests children aged 5-7 years old are using DD unattended with less than

half of parents agreeing they sit beside their children watching/helping them while online. Prior research has explored the concept of television as a 'babysitter' (Gantz and Masland, 1986, Götz et al. 2007, Beyens and Eggermont, 2017). It must be noted the term 'babysitter' is embroiled with negative connotations of substitute care, further heightened when referencing a device, not a human. Literature has framed this 'substitute care' in ways that hold varying level of judgement. Likely less judgemental than 'shut up toys', Sergi et al. (2017) likens it to the concept of othermothering, a theoretical approach rooted in the African-American tradition referring to women who share parenting with the biological parents, reporting that parents partially transfer the role of mentor to the device. This is supported by device applications using 'mothering' sensory elements: a female voice and encouraging prompts to promote principles of commitment, reciprocity, connectedness, and social interactions (Sergi et al., 2017). Unlike humans however, DD cannot offer feedback and parents may miss information when children use DD unsupervised (Eichen et al, 2021). There is a risk of content that is not age-appropriate, as referenced earlier with the risks children were exposed to (Dias and Brito, 2021).

Post pandemic research

The pandemic changed family living by imposing restrictions on social distancing and school openings, resulting in parents losing childcare whilst gaining home schooling responsibilities. Activities such as classes, homework, and recreation time moved online with increased device usage helping parents to cope (Madigan et al., 2022). This increased use of DD remained even after restrictions were lifted (Hedderson et al., 2023). Academic research during this time focused on quantifying screen time increases (Madigan et al., 2022) or determining the cause, with Seguin et al. (2021) finding parental stress significantly predicted

children's screen time. Despite this societal change in family dynamics, little research has been conducted exploring the impact to parents, in particular, mothers.

Present study

This literature review uncovers research gaps (i) there is a paucity of research on mothers' experiences, despite them often being the main care giver and more likely to be juggling work and household responsibilities (ii) research focuses on pre-school age children or adolescents with limited research on infant school children aged 4-7 (iii) research is limited since the Covid-19 pandemic where children's device use increased (iv) DD as a 'babysitter' has been broadly explored but not focussed on (v) there are no phenomenology studies exploring lived experience. With mothers under researched within this area this study will help understand the challenges they face in navigating this time of digital innovation in motherhood. It will explore the question: What are working mothers' experiences of using DD as 'babysitters' with infant school children? This research will use the theoretical framework of (i) intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), a gendered model stating women are the central caregivers and should put children's needs above their own, devoting significant time, energy, and money in raising them. This model of motherhood is understood to be the normative standard in the UK (Budds, 2021). This framework will be used alongside (ii) extensive mothering (Christopher, 2012) which challenges the intensive mothering ideology, reframing good mothering as being 'in charge' and responsible for their children's wellbeing. These ideologies of working mothers will provide particularly relevant frameworks to explore mothering with DD. The importance of mothers' roles in this new digital world has significant influence on children's futures. Exploring mothers' lived experience will contribute to the existing knowledge base, informing guidance and aiding development of appropriate support.

Research method

This study explores the deeper meaning of mothers' experiences with DD with their children, using a qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) assumes a connection between what people say and their thinking and emotional state, exploring "meaning and sense-making" (Smith and Osborn, 2007, p. 54); an ontological assumption of constructionism. The idiographic emphasis on the role of personal experience aligns with the research question, allowing a rich grasp of the texture of mothers' experiences. With an interpretivist epistemology, IPA helps to understand how people make sense of their life experiences, underpinned by phenomenology and hermeneutics (Willig, 2013). It explores how meanings are constructed by individuals within both a social and personal world. IPA emphasises the research practice as a dynamic one with an active role for the researcher in the process; the phenomenological analysis produced by the researcher is always an interpretation of the participants experience (Smith et al., 2009). This study deals with complexities of digital innovation and decision-making in motherhood making IPA particularly useful; Smith and Osborn (2007:55) suggest the methodology suitable when "concerned with complexity, process or novelty". The researcher followed the process for IPA as outlined in Smith and Osborn (2007).

Participants

To be eligible for inclusion participants (i) were UK mothers working full-time or part time (ii) were over 21-years-old, ensuring they were not true digital natives exposed to the internet, social networks, and mobile phones since childhood, as their experience mothering in the digital world is likely to differ (iii) allowed unsupervised device use with their child/ren (iv) oldest/only child to be at infant school (4-7 years old). This last inclusion point

was considered important; to get closer to meaning-making requires introspective attention of experiences which will be heightened the first time, considered with greater intentionality (compared with experiences of subsequent children). Although this research cannot gain direct access to mothers' worlds, it can ensure it finds the closest way to get there; when the meaning-making is happening, and decisions being made. Six participants were interviewed based on guidance from Wood et al. (2012) stating at least 5 hours of data is required for IPA. This sample size aligns with other IPA studies, providing a manageable number of detailed individual accounts (Smith and Osborn, 2007). Participant details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant details

Participant pseudonym	Child pseudonym	Child age and school year	Siblings age	Marital status	Working status
Amara	Aaron	5, Reception	3	Married	Part time
Becky	George	5, Year 1	5 months	Married	Maternity leave
Melanie	Jess	5, Year 1	3	Married	Full time
Jen	Millie	5, Year 1	3	Married	Part time
Laura	Ava	6, Year 1	3	Separated	Full time
Nicola	Rosie	6, Year 2	n/a	Separated	Full time

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was gained from Manchester Metropolitan University. Participants provided written and verbal consent and given the opportunity to withdraw at any point. It was made clear throughout that participation was voluntary with no pressure placed on participants to participate. Recordings were stored securely and deleted upon project completion. Pseudo names were used at the point of transcription. As outlined previously, the term 'babysitter' can have negative connotations of substitute care. The researcher avoided using this term, both in the research advert and the interview, to avoid judgement and ensure rapport was not hindered. When participants naturally discussed this type of use the

researcher was careful to mirror language used by participants and if required, normalise the behaviour (for example “yes, you’re not alone”).

Data collection

Recommended for IPA, one-to-one in-depth semi structured interviews were selected as they were most appropriate for exploring individual experience, particularly in respect to meaning-making of DD. Conducted in February-March 2023, each interview broadly covered the following topics (a) introduction: building rapport, ensuring participants were comfortable and trust developed early on); (b) exploring devices generally; (c) understanding unsupervised devices use; (d) future of devices. Purposive snowball sampling (Willig, 2013) via email was used, utilising the researcher’s network (friends and family were not interviewed). If someone expressed interest in the study after seeing the advert, they were sent a Participant Information Sheet providing further study details. Informed consent was provided prior the interview by completing the consent form, and verbal consent was recorded (separate to the interview itself). Interviews were a maximum one hour long conducted via Microsoft Teams, felt to be the easiest for time limited working mothers. Interviews were transcribed via Microsoft Teams automated transcription. The recordings were rewatched with transcription amended for accuracy.

Data analysis method

Described by Smith and Obsorn (2007) as a personal process, the researcher chose to fully engage with one transcript to begin. The manual line-by-line coding process began with the researcher reading the transcript several times, annotating, and continuously circling around noting similarities, differences, and contradictions in the text. As outline by Larkin et al. (2009) annotation focused on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. The purpose

was to capture the meaning unit; the essence of central meaning from the participants lived experience. Once exhausted, emerging themes were documented. Themes were listed and connections made, becoming super-ordinate themes. A process of convergence and divergence began with subsequent transcripts using the themes from the first transcript to facilitate analysis; themes were supported as well as emerging ones found. Only once themes were fully established were they evaluated alongside the theoretical framework. Themes were not altered upon engaging with the framework. This consideration was important to ensure the research remained emergent.

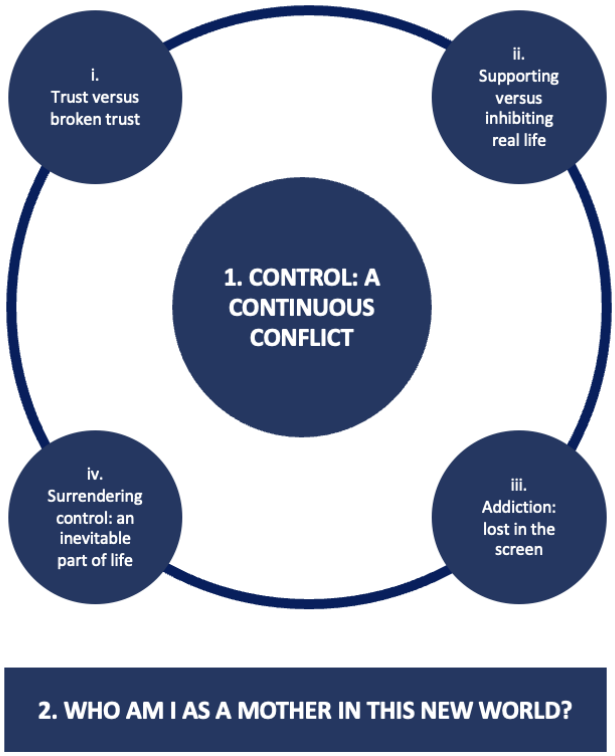
Transparency and openness

It has been reported how sample size has been determined, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations and all measures in the study. Materials and anonymised transcripts for this study will be made available upon email request to the corresponding author. This study was not preregistered in an online repository.

Analysis

Two super-ordinate themes were identified (Figure 1): Control: a continuous conflict and, underpinning it, who am I as a mother in this new world?

Figure 1
Presentation of themes



Where quotes are provided, they are attributed to participants using their pseudonym and transcript line number. This provides rigour and transparency allowing the reader to track the continuity of the participants perspective throughout the study and to understand the analytical process from data to themes.

Control: a continuous conflict

This theme illustrates participants constant ebb and flow of feeling in and out of control when devices were used as a 'babysitter'. Mothers illustrated continuous conflict with trust in devices versus broken trust, supporting and inhibiting real world, the loss of control with

addiction and a surrendering of control as devices are a part of life. Control across these sub-themes resulted in a constant sense of conflict. It must be noted that as participants were recruited on the criteria of their children using devices unsupervised, there were varying levels of 'babysitter' usage. It became apparent during the interviews that Amara exercised the most control over device use, showing least 'babysitter' usage compared to other participants.

Trust versus broken trust

Mothers had a level of inherent trust in devices with Melanie, Nicola and Amara referencing feeling 'safe'. Trust was afforded from (a) child specific devices, Amazon Kids, or apps, YouTube/Netflix Kids; (b) app recommendations from school or family; or (c) the content itself, from increased trust in educational games to less trust in 'absolutely brain rot stuff' (Jen, 336). Child devices allowed mothers to 'put their ages and then it creates… profiles… with age-appropriate games and cartoons' (Melanie, 236-238). With 'kid' focused apps 'it's all age appropriate' (Laura, 197). This gives mothers confidence, even when unsupervised, they can 'control what they're watching' (Melanie 290-291).

Trust can however be compromised when the child 'figures out how she can download things' which mothers 'don't recognise' (Jen, 149-150), or mother's expectations of what is appropriate are not met because 'even if you put parental control on, you never know what's gonna come up' (Nicola, 434-435). Becky illustrates these points when describing George's discovery of YouTube's Rainbow Friends, which she 'didn't really pay much attention to it at first' (63-64).

> 'I think it's just the algorithms, whatever he was pressing as he's going, you know, and they're just clicking on things, clicking on things. And, because it was only YouTube Kids that he was watching it on, so just obviously found him somehow on the algorithms' (152-156).

Becky's repetition of language mirrors her son's behaviour 'clicking on things, clicking on things'; a sense of unconscious navigating leading to unintended discoveries. Clarifying it was on 'YouTube Kids' reinforced her shock. Describing the algorithm's 'found him' indicate it is unsolicited; the algorithms were looking for George, somewhat humanising the device itself. Her language is uncertain, 'I think', 'somehow', indicating her lack of confidence in her statement, though, in conflict, describing this as obvious too. She vividly expresses the first time her and her husband saw the program George 'loves…so much' (256).

> We were like Oh my God, it's really dark…like really dark, like just weird stuff being said and actually in all honesty, I guess a lot of it goes over his head because he doesn't understand what they're saying…but me and Darren were quite freaked out (81-85)

Repetition of 'like' and 'really dark' place emphasis on the shock. She reassures herself he does not understand but ends the extract reiterating the shock felt by her and her husband. Many participants echoed this continuous conflict playing out from one sentence to the next illustrating the uncertainty felt.

Supporting versus inhibiting the real world

Device as a 'third parent' (Jen, 251) undoubtedly supports mothers putting them in control and giving them 'little pockets of time' (Amara, 403) to 'get stuff done' (Laura, 216). This included household chores, working, and self-care. Devices are used for 'bribery' (Jen, 142) encouraging children to 'do stuff' (Becky, 657) like homework, with 'the iPad as…the reward' (Becky, 630). Devices also supported daily routines including mealtime and bedtime; 'to get him to eat…we'd let him watch something' (Becky, 67-68). Jen used her phone to play

a bedtime story and ‘she’ll be asleep…within minutes’ (508-509). Melanie used ‘Alexa…for bedtime stories’ (644-645) and meditations apps ‘if I can’t be bothered’ (675). Equally devices inhibited developmental skills, compromised mental health, and prohibited other play. Nicola showed concern that Rosie ‘talks into Siri or…Alexa…she doesn’t type…they don’t have to think about their spelling’ (336-341). Jen references Millie’s physical skills concerned ‘her writing skills, like fine motor, where she’s too used to swiping on the tablets…have potentially suffered’ (238-240). Laura worried about social skills, ‘if you’re both glued to a device…you’re not interacting, you’re not having that social interaction’ (426-428) There is concern devices impact real play with Jen asking her daughter ‘shall we do something, real?’ (199) . She goes on to describe the irony of devices prohibiting real play: ‘they watch other people playing with real toys and I’m like you’ve got all these things here that you can play with but you want to watch someone else playing with them’ (342-346). It is not as explicit as devices competing with ‘real play’; devices indirectly affect children’s state of mind. Becky describes how Rainbow Friends has been a ‘nightmare’ (78) leaving George ‘petrified’ (183) not wanting to ‘sleep in his room [alone]’ (188). ‘He won’t actually even go in the bathroom now without me…because he’s scared’ (193-199). Nicola discusses how her daughter ‘at the age of six is body conscious’ (822). ‘She talks about doing exercise and being fit…that doesn't come from me …she's obsessed with my treadmill…with my weights.’ (935-943) When asked where this comes from, she replied: ‘without a doubt, it’s what she sees on YouTube’ (951). Jen worries that despite being ‘very very careful not to talk about…body negatively in front of her…it’s all well and good me protecting her…if she’s then just going to go online and find stuff…for herself (Jen, 667-679). This demonstrates the continuous conflict of control often felt by mothers ‘choosing of the battles’ (Jen, 844); ‘life’s so much easier’ (Becky, 433) when devices are used as babysitters, but it comes at a cost.

Addiction: lost in the screen

Many participants were concerned devices 'kind of overtakes everything' (Laura, 88) and if allowed children 'would just watch it all night' (Becky, 226-227). Language used likened devices to a drug; obsessed, absorbed, glued, hooked, dependent, 'whatever he can get his hands on…if we're home it's…the iPad, if we're out, it's one of our phones' (Becky, 104-106). Some discussed dependency: 'there's so much stuff that they just won't do without them' (Jen, 175-276) and 'she even cleans her teeth and goes to toilet watching our iPad' (Laura, 43-44). Many referenced the inability to get children's attention if on a device 'she zones out...it's like everything else is not happening around her' (Laura, 443-448). Melanie used this to her advantage when using devices at bedtime: 'there's nothing…to take their attention' (Melanie, 652). Language depicts the device as a world in its own right 'he's just in the screen' (Becky, 572). Melanie's use of language 'take their attention' humanises the device visualising attention is something tangible which can be taken.

Addiction is vividly illustrated in an extract from Laura:

> I was cooking…I said to her, can you take your little sister to the toilet…and because she just put her iPad on she literally had a meltdown like she went mental cause I'd had the audacity to ask her to do something else…I've never seen her cry so much…she was sobbing her heart out…I found it quite amazing how that could have such an effect on her, like, she was so desperate to start watching it from the moment we got in…she had like a breakdown. And I thought that's not normal…surely it shouldn't be like that. That's what I don't like about it. The fact that it could alter your…not alter their minds, but…it's an overreaction to something that shouldn't have been in overreaction and it's…the screen time…dominating her brain…this is addictive (Laura, 102-121)

Strength of metaphoric language displays both the impact the device has on her daughter 'sobbing her heart out', 'breakdown', 'meltdown' and Laura's view shocked by the

‘overreaction’ and the fear of what the device is doing to her brain. Her use of the word ‘addictive’ indicates the limited control her daughter has. She goes on to say: ‘I don’t think it’s her fault, it’s just, you know, it’s a screen addiction, isn’t it?’ (Laura, 549-550). Ending in a question indicates her uncertainty, questioning whether she has any control.

Addiction impacted children’s basic needs: ‘if they’re watching screens when they’re eating…they’re not listening to their bodies’ (Jen, 744-745). Becky and Laura discuss eating whilst using devices: ‘he doesn’t even realise he’s eating half the time…there’s pasta all around him…he’s just so transfixed on the screen’ (Becky, 337-339), ‘she sits there eating breakfast, watching it and not eating breakfast’ (Laura, 172-173). In contrast, Nicola discussed Rosie using the tablet before bedtime ‘if she wasn't as good as what she was, I probably would change the approach…but literally she can turn the iPad off…and…be asleep within 5 minutes’ (633-637). Amara also did not directly discuss addiction however was much less likely to use devices as ‘babysitters’ consciously controlling her approach; using devices with her son specifically for interactive usage, rather than passive watching: ‘I’d rather he’s doing something interactive than just sitting there staring at a screen for ages’ (185-187). She goes on to say she avoids ‘letting them watch…our phones in bed…we worry that it’ll get into bad habits’ (Amara, 788-790).

Surrendering control: an inevitable part of life

All participants felt in inevitability to accept devices which are ‘part of life’ (Nicola, 662) and ‘the future’ (Laura, 353). Melanie, on multiple occasions, reiterating her ‘need to get with the times’ (293). Although there is acceptance devices are part of life, there is also an uncomfortable awareness of the knowledge gap with mother’s being ‘not very tech savvy’ (Jen, 402) or ‘such an old lady with technology’ (Melanie, 623-624). Nicola feels her

daughter is ‘probably exposed too much’ but continues to say ‘I don't know enough about technology…I don't always know the risk’ (Nicola, 377-382). Mothers felt the burden to ‘safeguard…children from devices’ (Laura, 585-586) lay solely with them, with only Becky feeling the app companies should take responsibility. The lack of technical knowledge, burden of responsibility and the unknown future led to inaction, ‘I’m just desperate for him to get on the next thing’ (Becky, 257) or mothers using language of future intent, ‘I’m gonna implement some rules’ (Laura, 512)

Jen captures both these points:

> ‘I probably should bring myself up to speed a little bit more on what the effects of it…are and how detrimental is it if I’m giving my child too much screen time…but it’s adding it to the list, the to-be-read pile…of things to do and to read…if its left to me to enforce there will be an aspect of laziness of about it…it’s the balance, it’s the juggle’ (845-853)

Jen’s use of ‘probably should’ indicates her desire; she feels accountable but acknowledges her conflict, emphasising the battle of time by rephrasing the struggle three times ‘adding…to the list’, ‘to-be-read pile’ ‘things to do and to read’. Her use of the word lazy implies she has a choice, but it is questionable whether she does.

Who am I as a mother in this new world?

This super-ordinate theme underpins the theme of control. It illustrates mothers questioning their expectations of themselves, battling the construct of the ‘perfect mother’ within an ever-changing world. Despite knowing ‘it’s a different world now’ (Becky, 301) ‘taking a big shift towards digital’ (Jen, 714), mothers often base their expectations of motherhood on their own mothers, their childhoods or on their perception of societal expectations. Three participants asked the question ‘what did my mum/parents do?’; referencing not having devices they

asked, ‘how did she get anything done’ (Jen, 267) and ‘it must have been so horrendous for them’ (Melanie, 894-895). Mothers do not want negativity they faced as children to impact their children. Melanie remembers not being allowed to watch television ‘I'm not gonna make my daughter feel left out’ (943-944). Nicola discusses Roblox, ‘sometimes I think she shouldn’t be playing it, but…everyone else is…I’ve always vowed that I don’t want her to be singled out’ (455-461). Most mothers alluded to the societal pressures they felt, even though they acknowledged that they are ‘having to do it all and it’s just not feasible’ (Jen, 810-811). Many referenced guilt: ‘I've let them spend too long on the tablet…I should be making more time to spend with him’ (Amara, 166-168). Jen discusses ‘the perfect mother’:

> I’ve come to realise…it really doesn’t exist but I recognise how much pressure is…put on us as society to be this perfect mother, the mother who spends every working moment of her hour living for her children, doing everything for her children…putting herself aside, never shouting, you know a real Mary Poppins mother, never getting cross…never feeling like she’s sort of sacrificed anything and…it just doesn’t exist and I find society is geared really well towards making you feel guilty if you don’t measure up (49-59).

Jen knows the ‘perfect mother’ does not exist, emphasised by her likening to a Disney character, though feels she has a ‘constant battle and daily struggle’ (71-73) reminding herself. She describes the perfect mother as someone who not only puts her children’s needs ahead of her own but does this happily. Her use of the word ‘never’ alongside negative emotions further emphases the fantasy character; there is no middle ground, only positive extremes. These extreme emotions of mothering are mirrored with device use:

> I hate how much screen time they have but at the same time it’s a crux for me that…I fall back on when I need to do something…I hate it, I hate it and love it in equal measure, we call it, it’s really bad, we nickname it…the square au pair, or the third parent, because it keeps them entertained for long enough while you, you know whatever it is that you’re needing to do, that’s the reliance (245-253)

Jen uses opposing heightened emotions of love and hate, using each word seven times during the interview, depicting her emotional pull. Her words to describe device as babysitter as 'really bad' illustrates her discomfort, one she shares with her husband as naming the device is shared, 'we call'. It is a reliance that affords her time to do jobs she 'needs' to do; feeling she has no choice. In questioning who she is as a mother using devices she discusses 'mum guilt' (797), feeling like a 'lazy parent' (263) which she 'hates' and feeling like a 'shit mum' (841) when told by a friend over 30 minutes daily screen time is 'really bad' (840). She acknowledges 'they could say that it's really really really bad but I can't see myself not using it' (866-867). This extract illustrates it is perhaps as addictive for mothers as for children.

Discussion

To the authors knowledge this was the first phenomenological study in this field, looking to illuminate the lived experiences of mothers using devices with their children to support them with their lives. This study highlights the continuous conflict of control felt by mothers to do what was best for their children whilst managing their own lives and wellbeing. Four sub-ordinate themes were identified.

In the first sub-ordinate theme 'trust versus broken trust' trust is an attribute mothers rely on to feel in control when children use devices unsupervised. When trust is broken it can leave mothers feeling an uncomfortable loss of control. Device and app designers build trust affordances into their products promoting them with 'kids' labels, though what companies deem appropriate may not align with mothers' expectations. This supports findings from previous research with Sergi et al. (2017) referencing the unease parents felt due to lacking control of unsolicited intrusions, whilst Dias and Brito (2021) identified an unalignment between what parents thought children accessed compared to age-inappropriate content children admitted seeing. As Eichen et al. (2021) noted, parents may miss information when

children use devices unsupervised like reactions to content, how it is processed and if they are cognitively or emotionally over or under challenged. The extensive mothering ideology frames good mothering as being responsible for children's wellbeing even when the mother is not with the child (Christopher, 2012). The choices mothers make in ensuring devices are safe for children give them confidence they have exercised responsible control, even when children are unsupervised. This confidence, as shown within this study and existing literature, can be broken leading to the continuous conflict of control.

The second sub-ordinate theme 'supporting versus inhibiting real life' highlights the clear tension felt by mothers when devices were used as 'babysitter's'. Undoubtedly, devices give mothers control, supporting them with extra time for household chores, work, and self-care. Adversely, they compromise real play, social skills, development, and mental health. This supports existing research with the help devices bring mothers (Bentley et al., 2016; Dias and Brito, 2021; Eichen et al., 2021; Sergi et al., 2017). When interviewing children Dias and Brito (2021) found they were exposed to risks such as being scared or having nightmares, as Becky described. This research differed to research by Dias and Brito (2021) with parents in this study aware of unintended consequences of screen use such as impact to real word, mental health, and body image. Although conducted only two years ago (Dias and Brito, 2021) it could indicate the rapid changing pace of technology, media portrayal or education. Christopher (2012) described the impact of working and mothering feeling 'physically and emotionally spent by the end of the workday' (p. 87), highlighting the importance of their own needs as mothers. Extensive mothering reframes employment as time away from children being important for their own needs, and devices similarly play this role; not only giving mothers a chance to do work but for self-care. Unlike intensive mothering which focuses on children's needs, mothers focus on the importance of their own needs and

wellbeing. Christopher (2012) found that mothers justified employment based on their personal needs, much like the mothers in this research do with devices.

The most emotive theme ‘addiction: lost in the screen’ emphasised mothers concerns of device addictiveness. Some felt children were dependant on them to perform daily activities, negatively impacting their basic needs and attention.

Although this theme has been explored in previous research (Bentley et al., 2016; Dias and Brito, 2021; Sergi et al., 2017), limiting excessive use via screen time was the focus. This research highlights the intensity of addiction depicting mothers lived experiences. This is the peak of loss of control; both with mothers, as well as children losing attention and ability to perform basic tasks. Within this research Nicola, a single mother, did not reference addiction or appear concerned like Melanie, Becky, Laura, and Jen. Extensive mothering finds single mothers views differ from married mothers with their lack of choice in having to work making them less accountable to the expectations of intensive mothering (Christopher, 2012) which may be felt by Nicola and device use. It also found single mothers were more outspoken about needing breaks from their children for their own emotional wellbeing. Laura, the only other single mother participant did worry about addiction. This would benefit from more research.

The final theme ‘surrendering control’ devices are accepted as an inevitable part of life. Mothers feel they have no control over their existence in the future. They feel responsible for safeguarding their children though feel less in control as they recognise their knowledge gaps. Previous research supports the belief that devices are part of the future (Sergi et al., 2017, Livingstone and Blum, 2020). Existing literature also found parents struggling to keep up with understanding technology though focused on screen time as an action (Livingstone and Blum, 2020; Dias and Brito, 2021). Much like Christopher (2012) finding single mothers felt

less accountable as they had limited choice in working, the inevitability of device dominance in the future makes parents less accountable.

The second theme ‘why am I as a mother in this new world’ highlighted mothers feeling pressured to be the ‘perfect mother’ despite knowing it does not exist. Their expectations of motherhood in the digital world are based on their own mothers, their childhoods, and their perceptions of societal expectations; this is heightened further in battling the digitally everchanging world with their children. Bentley et al. (2016) also found mothers own childhood experiences influenced how they felt about screen viewing. This theme adds new knowledge to existing research on devices, supporting research on extensive mothering; even when mothers rejected the principles of intensive mothering, they still felt accountable to them (Christopher, 2021). Budds (2021) argues the need to challenge intensive mothering ideology as this ‘problematic model of motherhood’ (p. 1) demands unrealistic expectations risking isolating and overloading mothers; when these ideals are not met it contributes feelings of guilt and shame. Devices afford mothers time, reducing overload in some ways, with the ability to do other things, but adding in others, with guilt and discomfort. Society positions women as primary carers of the outcome of child development so they undoubtedly feel the weight of pressure, blaming themselves for falling short (Budd, 2021); this was seen with most mothers feeling they had sole responsibility of safeguarding their children with devices. With the focus on children, not mothers, it can be detrimental to mothers’ wellbeing; mothers struggle to reject recommendations on what is best for their child even if it compromises their own wellbeing as they fear it will be seen as selfish and not in line with the selfless mother ideal. This was vividly evident with Jen’s extract, though was highlighted by most mothers during this research with Amara questioning why she felt so pressurised as a mother.

Concluding remarks, limitations, and implications

This study, the first phenomenological study in this field, illuminates the lived experience of mothers using devices as babysitters. Mothers felt a continuous conflict of control in trying to do what was best for their children whilst managing their own lives and wellbeing. Although rejecting intensive mothering ideology, in many cases mothers still felt accountable to the principles of it; this risked compromising their wellbeing highlighting this problematic model of motherhood evident with device use. With technology changing rapidly, further research is vital as lived experience will likely differ over time. Recommendations for further research have emerged; this study suggested potential differences with single mothers. This can be explored in further research to understand single mothers' experiences of devices as 'babysitters'. Most participants were of middle socioeconomic level and white thus results may not be generalised to mothers of diverse ethnic backgrounds or different socioeconomic profiles, with further research recommended here. This study adds depth to the existing knowledge base and can be used to inform guidance and aid development of appropriate services for mothers, ensuring when it comes to device use, their wellbeing is not to the detriment of the problematic model of motherhood they hold themselves accountable to.

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