

Article

# Online Mothering: The Empowering Nature of a Hashtag Movement Founded on Social Sharing and Stereotype Deconstruction

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**Abstract:** Online mothering is an arising and multifaceted phenomenon as the online world offers unique opportunities and risks in a particularly challenging period. The overall aim of this work is to investigate the features of the hashtag movement #itcouldbeme, which was born after a terrible news event concerning a newborn's death, specifically concerning (a) the e-activation levels; (b) the emotional arousal; (c) the potential presence of deconstruction of stereotypes concerning intensive mothering. To investigate positioning, reactions, and emotions, a database of 394 online posts gathered from popular Italian social networks was created, manually codified, and analyzed through the chi-square test. The results enabled us to deepen the associations among these variables, thus revealing the opportunities for empowerment offered by the socio-cultural positioning, different emotional pathways, and adhesion to this online movement. Finally, implications for professionals and public health issues are discussed.

**Keywords:** online mothering; hashtag movement; e-participation; counter-stereotype; emotional arousal



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## 1. Introduction

Several studies have approached the importance of online activism as an essential source, having concrete offline implications across several domains (political, environmental, social, and so on). However, to the best of our knowledge, the investigation of how individual experiences related to open or subtle threats, such as obstetric violence, act as an online social denouncement has been rather neglected. This topic can be sensitive given the overall critical scenario of parenthood, as has been presented above. In addition, online participation and activism imply a mix of cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions that social research may have not merged. Before assessing the core features of this work, an overall frame concerning the experience of parenthood and the related needs are proposed as starting reflections.

Becoming parents is an entirely revolutionary experience, affecting any domain of both individual life and family constellation. This transition can be associated not only with positive outcomes but also with insecurity, struggles, and frustrations [1], especially for women, potentially leading to a negative influence on postnatal mood and caregiving behaviors [2]. In this work, obstetric violence, as a specific threat that became salient following a terrible news event, is the starting point of a more general reflection on new mothers' experiences, health, and well-being. As a second main point, the importance of social networks and related e-participation practices is argued, specifically concerning parental roles: mothers can find trustworthy and reliable sharing containers in online tools. Aligned with the previous literature, social media users rely on them to both narrate personal stories and try to change the system. The empirical section proposed some important corroborations about these matters and offered new insights and applications related to the specific target it deals with. Women's experiences of identity change in the process of becoming

mothers have been widely explored, implying different experiences, such as the perception of losing or expanding themselves for a time while incorporating their children into their identities, as well as the feeling that the new relationships with their children intensified their personalities and identities [3]. The feelings of joy and fulfillment can be accompanied by a general dissatisfaction with motherhood [4], mainly related to (a) physical changes and recovery from pregnancy and birth itself [5], with eventual adjustments needed in case of problematic birth [6]; (b) development of new caregiving skills and interpersonal/social roles, framed in new family constellations and social networks [7,8], even implying role conflicts and feelings of resentment [9]; (c) stressful emotional activation, connected to insecurities and depressive, anxious, or hostile states [10].

Beyond these individual/interpersonal factors, additional contextual and socio-cultural variables can affect the experience of mothering. Firstly, childbirth can be accompanied by several forms of disrespect and abuse—a phenomenon known as ‘obstetric violence’ [11]—ranging from non-consensual care to physical abuse, from discrimination to abandonment of care [12]. The implied attitudes and behaviors, rather widespread all around the world, are rooted in patriarchal cultures and gender stereotypes; in addition, they can be exacerbated by the asymmetric nature of the relationship between health professionals and patients [11]. Obstetric violence can have long-lasting impacts on women’s lives and is even related to a loss of trust in the medical field, a sense of personal failure, and association of their delivery to sexual assault and rape [13]. The hardness of a mother’s experience can be also related to the more general cultural understanding of ‘intensive mothering’ (IM), defined through social imperatives about good/bad mothering and synthesized as a ‘child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive and financially expensive’ investment [14]. If the undoubted importance of the mother–child dyad has been widely acknowledged by influential developmental psychology (e.g., the impact of maternal deprivation on child development [15]), how women are required to care by IM has nowadays become increasingly problematic and unrealistic [16]: the proposed unreachable expectations of mothers appear as a heritage of conservative feminine identities, redefining women primarily through their relationships to children [17].

This composite scenario emphasizes how hard, sensitive, and struggling the construction of a mother’s identity is, as well as the development of an emotional bond with the fetus/newborn. Moment by moment, these processes risk merging and catalyzing postpartum mood disorders, affecting the caregiving behaviors and even evolving into detachment from the child [1], consequently having a negative impact on the overall health of mother and child [2,4,18]. Fighting against and especially preventing these risks requires a wide range of individual, interpersonal, and social resources: several kinds of coping strategies and social support approaches can concur to positive outcomes, both in real life and in online experience.

This work aims to mind the gaps concerning the multifaceted perspectives of online activism through the analysis of a specific case study. #itcouldbeme is a hashtag movement born in January 2023 in Italy after a terrible news story concerning a newborn’s death—which has been framed as a case of obstetric violence in public opinion—rebounded in the online world.

In line with the social literature on self-disclosure concerning new mothering and health issues, the research we are going to present aims to investigate several psychosocial features of involvement/participation in the hashtag movement #itcouldbeme. In particular, the following objects were set:

- (a) To investigate the types of e-activation related to the hashtag movement;
- (b) To differentiate the emotional pathways implied and expressed in posts adhering to the movement;
- (c) To individuate eventual critical reflections about pre-constructed images and stereotypes related to ‘intensive mothering’;
- (d) To test the possible connections among these variables.

In the first part of the article, we proposed the theoretical frame as set at the intersection of three main social constructs: the practices of social sharing and self-disclosure are contextualized, referring to the multifaceted and ongoing phenomenon of online mothering; in addition, the principal features of e-participation, including its empowering effects, have been outlined. The second part of the article presents the research through its main steps: after the presentation of the case study, the selection procedure of the corpus, the individuation of the variable for coding, the main results, and an extensive discussion are proposed. Some final considerations, including weaknesses, future perspectives, and implications, close the manuscript.

### *1.1. Theoretical Background*

#### *1.1.1. Social Sharing and Self-Disclosure*

In the continuum of interpersonal/social relations, revealing personal information to others is a rather expected practice known as ‘self-disclosure’ [19]. In this continuum, a balance between openness and closedness, as well as public and private person management, is implied in the efforts to maximize rewards and minimize threats [20]. In view of preventing risks and costs, selective disclosure is usually preferred, e.g., through dyadic interactions and trusted recipients [21]. The comfortable feeling when disclosing with strangers [22] is equally acknowledged, since these individuals cannot access the disclosers’ networks.

What about self-disclosure on the less controlled and confined social networking system? Especially when internet users share their content with a whole network of friends/followers, either personal information or dyadic exchanges are available to all participants, thus violating the classic understanding of self-disclosure [20]. A second violation of the expected disclosure practices concerns sharing intimate information next to peripheral information, which is not in line with the principle of incremental and gradual disclosures [23]. These unconventional features of self-disclosure may be explained either by proposing social media disclosure as a new kind of self-disclosure behavior or by focusing on a functional approach. In line with this second route, individuals’ self-disclosing behaviors can be understood according to their major sources of value, that is social validation, self-expression, relational development, identity clarification, and social control [24]. These disclosure goals have been theorized to be activated by personality characteristics and situational cues [25]. Social media affordances, such as differentiated data permanence, communal visibility of social information and communication, message editability, and associations between individuals (as well as between a message and its creator) are considered to affect a users’ perceptions of media utility in supporting social practices [26].

#### *1.1.2. Online Mothering: A Multifaceted Practice*

The digital revolution concerning health and disease management also encompasses pregnancy and mothering [27]. The self-informed cyber-mothers make use of the internet for updates and discussions about health and educational issues related to their children. Extensive content, instantaneous and no-stop availability, and anonymity are the main reported strengths leading to perceived empowerment [28].

During pregnancy and neo-mothering, the use of technology and social media has several benefits, such as the immediate availability of information and useful suggestions offered by professionals and other mothers, thus implying perceived support and social connections [29]. In addition, a set of apps enables self-knowledge and self-monitoring during these new experiences. As flexible and comfortable tools, social media and platforms propose a tidbitisation of information, appearing as more ‘digestive’, trustful, and detailed [27]. On the other side, opposing risks are at stake: misinformation [30], reduced responsibility, and hyper-information can be experienced. This last one, together with other social factors and cultural norms, can result in the extreme experience of ‘intensive mothering’ [31], meaning a responsibility overload.

Intensive mothering is an ideology constructed by social and cultural imperatives that demand the 'good' mother to be child-centered and untiring in her investment in her children's outcomes [14]. The new mother's identity should be sacrificed through intensive costs made of physical, mental, emotional, and economic resources. Across the social classes and from a range of backgrounds, intensive mothering now represents 'good mothering' [32]; the acceptance of fallibility has been substantially reduced as the 'perfect' mother is consistently loving, selfless, and self-sacrificing [33]. In addition, only breastfeeding mothers are 'good' mothers, since breastfeeding is considered a pinnacle for children's complete development [34]. The great potential of breastfeeding on child development is widely acknowledged both for the compositional superiority of breast milk over formula milk and the mother-child interaction, connection of skin-to-skin contact, and the related promotion of secure attachment [35]. As a consequence, mothers feel fulfilled through breastfeeding [36].

The use of 'mommy blogs' and social networking have been found to positively impact maternal well-being. This improvement in well-being is important because it is linked to several other critical areas: it can affect parental stress, the quality of conjugal (marital or partnership) life, and the presence of depressive symptoms [29]. As an example, a specific type of 'networked empowerment' concerns caring for children with special needs: mothers can find precious support from other parents, access resources, and explore new ways for promoting health advocacy among caregivers at a local and national level [37].

In addition, transitory entertainment can be offered when mothers can take a break from caring duties [38]. However, looking at videos or messaging during breastfeeding (brexting) can be a source of distraction, negatively affecting the mother's sensitivity and responsiveness and the cognitive and linguistic development of babies [39].

In this balance between positive and negative sides, online activities can play an essential role in the processes of identity construction and self-presentation. The containers for women's emancipation and empowerment can be turned into the opposite. At times, the online communities become a showcase to exhibit femininity and consumerist norms, to propose new types of social comparison and competition, and to gain public confirmation about being a 'good mother'. A two-faceted scenario can be outlined: on one side, the performance of digital mothering gives a pregnant woman the status of celebrity which is hard to obtain in real life [27]. The pregnant body becomes the symbol of an ideal female body and of a perfect mothering. These practices are usually accompanied by the normative image of a happy family, where members are emotionally involved and have special closeness. On the other side, new doubts about one's competence could arise, leading to negative feelings, stress, and a sense of inadequacy [29].

A countertendency to the online glorification of perfect mothering and family can be found in the rising efforts to contrast the model of intensive mothering. Women make use of online communities and social networking to offer counter-narratives concerning mothering and, thus, refuse to adhere to pre-constructed parental models [31]. Sharing non-filtered, even embarrassing, personal pictures describing ordinary and realistic situations can be considered a form of digital activism and counter-stereotype. The hard transition to parenthood replaces more softened images [40].

A more explicit type of online activism is related to the online sharing of breastfeeding. Brelfies act as a form of digital activism aimed to de-stigmatize this activity in public and to present it as a social activity [41]. As an example, the Facebook group 'Free to Feed' was intentionally created to disclose story details of harassment and hate experienced during out-of-home breastfeeding. The use of captions and hashtags (e.g., #supportbreastfeeding, #breastisbest, and #liquidgold) empower the common feelings and concur to frame this case in the context of 'hashtag activism' [42], aimed to normalize public breastfeeding and to promote a sensitization beyond social media [43].

As a more critical point, women could feel the need to share negative happenings or conditions, such as postpartum depression or spontaneous abortion, but these situations can be either a 'taboo' or stigmatizing point [44]. In line with Social Penetration Theory [23],

self-disclosure is a key issue in interpersonal relations, leading to social support dynamics. In online contexts, social support can be an essential reason for sharing negative experiences and feelings [44]; in addition, online sharing matches the opportunity to overcome logistic and economic problems [45]. Social support is a fundamental need, as it is related to the wide range of ongoing problems concerning not only the babies' health and management but also the mummies' well-being [46]. As a consequence, traditional support offered by partners, relatives, friends, and professionals is accompanied by online communities [29], being costless, easily accessible, and guaranteeing a certain degree of anonymization. As a source of social support, social media can play an essential role in subjective well-being, especially in postnatal time and postpartum depression [47,48].

The preference for online disclosing can be additionally supported by applying the concept of reciprocity from the Social Exchange Theory [49]; even in a one-to-many communication, users felt encouraged to share personal stories after having read other similar ones, as this occurrence reduced social stigma perception and could catalyze cascading disclosures.

### 1.1.3. The Empowering Effect of e-Participation

Nelson and Wright [50] defined participation as 'a form in which individuals engage in actions as members of a group with the aim of improving on their conditions', but also a 'jointly shared and conscious action for a common cause based on a critical and conscientization process' [51]. In this frame, Campbell and Jovchelovitch [52] identify three fundamental dimensions for this psycho-social construct: (1) common social identity and social identification (with a social category), (2) shared social representation of social context (or world view), and (3) shared knowledge of power relations.

The conjoint focus on these dimensions enables one to better understand the related phenomena of 'media activism'. Media activism is a particular kind of activism that is undertaken through new media and that can work as a source of empowerment, considering the individual, interpersonal, and political/behavioral spheres [53]. At the individual level, Siddiquee [54] recognized social media as a 'safe place', since it provides a way to cope with solitude and isolation and to improve wellness [55]. At the interpersonal and political levels, [56] highlighted that some empowering functions can be found in social media discussions of e-participants, since they (a) construct common interpersonal and political strategies by employing shared decision-making practices; (b) proactively discuss norms and rules aimed at overcoming a critical or a particular problematic phase. In this scenario, expressed emotions can play an essential role in pursuing the empowering quality of e-participants: recent research has highlighted that emotions like anger or indignation, especially at higher levels, can lead to a kind of 'moral contagion' [57]. However, the presence of moderated and regulated negative emotions can promote forms of humanization and concrete prosocial participation toward the victims of a problematic situation, also implying forms of responsibility assumption [58]. Among the wide range of emotions, anger and sadness have been found to accompany e-participation in worldwide movements such as #metoo [59].

In this view, emotional arousal can be supposed to relate to activism, especially in cases of personal implication, such as sharing/denouncing the experience of obstetric violence. Consequently, the first hypothesis of this work is that online activism and emotional arousal are related (H1).

In social experience, three main types of social support can be found: (a) emotional, implying assurance, encouragement, care, and sympathy; (b) cognitive, offering information, suggestions, and guidance; (c) instrumental, providing material help and practical solutions [48]. As expected, online communities for mothers are especially focused on (a) and (b) [60]. However, an evolution in the community users' attitudes and behaviors has been found: starting from a lurker position, they can testify exchanges and social support, gradually implying an active supporting attitude. Learning coping strategies empowers their life and turns the newcomer into an 'expert'; the experienced empathy strengthens the feelings of belonging and closeness, leading to a disclosing and reciprocal agency [48].

Even social media design—through emoticons, reactions, and reputational marks such as ‘elite member’—can empower the perception of agency, involvement, and reactivity and can offer additional gratifications for e-participation.

The countless social movements unifying users all around the world can have several shared social drives, such as eco-friendliness and environment support (against climate changes, pollution, animal extinction), political issues (in favor of differently oppressed populations), social injustice (e.g., #blacklivesmatter), and gender issues (as in #metoo movement aimed to fight against sexual harassment). Online activism can widely connect persons having common beliefs, values, and attitudes in very strict times and with zero costs, enabling participants to produce and share information, deepen content, discover common feelings, and actively contribute [61]. The label slacktivism initially attributed to these movements [62] has been overcome in favor of the acknowledgments of the importance of these movements, having a ‘connective’ rather than ‘collective’ nature; the co-construction of contents and meanings is an important source of social capital [61].

A specific online tool that testifies the co-creative rhetoric of shared meanings is the use of the hashtag. Offering opportunities to identify and index specific contents and issues, hashtags create connections and support, stressing the concept of participative culture [63]. The ‘hashtag movement’ is a specific type of e-movement that acts by emphasizing an awareness of a problem and encouraging a debate through social media [64], since the related content can become viral through both top-down and bottom-up processes [65].

In line with these features, two additional hypotheses were set. Specifically, since relations between online activism and the deconstruction of stereotypes can be supposed to have an essential function even in critical episodes related to mothering, such as obstetric violence, we hypothesize that online activism and the deconstruction of stereotypes are related (H2).

In addition, even in a hashtag movement concerning obstetric violence, the deconstruction of stereotypes is supposed to relate to emotional arousal, given the expected deep and subjective commitment (H3).

## 2. The Research: Material and Methods

### 2.1. The Case Study

On 8 January 2023, Italian media disclosed terrible news: the death of a neonate in the bed of the hospital ‘S. Pertini’ (Rome), where he was born just two days before, caused by asphyxiation under the weight of his mother’s body, who was so tired she fell asleep during breastfeeding. Italian media and shocked public opinion mostly oriented their critics to a defective hospital system, especially referring to the nursery services, whose efficacy has been widely worsened because of the restrictive measures deriving from the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the sanitary emergency, the transition from pregnancy to motherhood could be assisted by partners or close family members; after that, women found themselves having to navigate those exhausting and challenging days largely on their own. Following this incident, a spontaneous online choral participation was activated: a great variety of posts and comments proposing stories, positions, and reflections were proposed and unified through the same hashtag #potevoessereio (‘it could be me’) and other similar ones.

### 2.2. Data Collection

To address the research inquiries, a total of 394 posts (all written in the Italian language) were gathered from two of the most popular social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram, in a period spanning from 23 January to 15 February 2023. The sampling procedure followed a non-probabilistic pathway, in line with the perspective of theoretical sampling [66]. The posts were specifically selected from those that ranked highest under the hashtag ‘#potevoessereio’ (translated as ‘#itcouldbeme’) and other related hashtags (#itcouldbemethatmother, #itcouldhappentome, #nevermorealone, #obstetricviolence). Specifically, after having written the first and most representative hashtag (#itcouldbeme),

all the resulting posts were selected; secondly, the other most recurring hashtags were used as keywords in the search bar. Then, the posts with the greater number of reactions were included in the sample to obtain 400 items. In a few cases, posts presented only re-posted content; as a consequence, these last ones were excluded from the sample. The main weakness of this procedure consists of not having a clear knowledge of the algorithms on Facebook and Instagram. However, we believe that the sample can be considered to be rather representative of the case study. The posts were selected from open profiles; however, for ethical considerations and privacy guarantees, any reference to the author's name was hidden.

The posts were then organized based on metadata, following the specific criteria of descriptive value. This process entailed identifying the source of the post, distinguishing between 194 posts collected from Facebook and 200 from Instagram, discerning the author's demographic, categorizing them as male, female, a group of people or a news page, and assessing the type (realistic, symbolic, illustrations, screenshots), the number of images shared, and the interactions collected by each post, including a count of likes and reactions (heart, hug, laughter, amazement, sadness, and anger), comments, and shares.

### 2.3. Coding Procedure

The coding process started with a thorough review of the literature on topics such as online activism and its different levels of engagement and agency [59,67], the functional significance of discrete emotions in facing challenging environments and events [68–70], and the perceptions about traditional mothering expectations such as intensive mothering [14], selflessness, and breastfeeding [36].

This review allowed for the creation of ad hoc categories, which simplified the coding process by outlining clear and distinct analysis objectives that were all systematically gathered in a codebook. The coding was processed manually.

Subsequently, two independent judges utilized this resource to codify the data, assessing levels of arousal, activism, and deconstruction of stereotypes within each comment. Inter-judge agreement was computed, revealing K Cohen values of 0.804 for activism, 0.596 for arousal, and 0.767 for deconstruction of stereotypes. These are the three categories relevant to the study presented here.

*Activism Level:* e-participation and media activism emerge as coping strategies with strong empowering effects [56,71]. However, for media activism to effectively take the shape of a social action definable as e-participation, with actual effects on the real world, it requires not only high levels of engagement but also high levels of agency. Hence, four different levels of activism have been identified to assess the author's involvement in communicative acts of awareness and activism (Table 1):

- 'Complaint': Detailed account of the childbirth experience with a specific focus on psychological and physical pain and fatigue;
- 'Local denounce': Locally contingent references to experiences of obstetric malpractices and violence and expression of feelings of solitude and inadequacy;
- 'Systemic denounce': socio-cultural and political denouncement of obstetric violence, attribution of blame, and reflections on the state of the Italian healthcare system;
- 'Proactive solution': Requests made to the government through petitions or repeated, personalized, and concrete appeals, such as the one to lift the ban on having a companion in the maternity ward due to COVID-19 regulations.

*Emotional arousal:* The emotional tone of each post was analyzed to unveil a potential correlation between the type of emotion expressed and possible involvement in online awareness-raising actions and interventions. Specifically, the category has been built on a five-point scale ('High sadness', 'Low sadness', 'Neutral', 'Low anger', 'High anger') that polarizes between high and low levels of sadness and anger, the most present emotions in similar cases of hashtag activism such as the #metoo movement [59], with one level dedicated to emotional neutrality.

**Table 1.** Presentation of variables, categories, and examples from the codebook (translated by the authors).

Variable	Category	Example
Activism level	Complaint	'I had not slept since before labor, so for three days. I had two frighteningly swollen eyes from exhaustion, and I had not washed for just as long'.
	Local denounce	'We were alone; because if you called, you almost felt like you were bothering them since they were short-staffed'.
	Systemic denounce	'Motherhood and fatherhood are not a private matter but a collective and community issue [...] By the way, where is the Government with the Ministry for Birthrate?'
	Proactive intention	'A petition has been created to try to change things. . . If you'd like, please sign  .
Emotional arousal	High sadness	'To the isolation that is not humane and to the fatigue that birthing women cannot feel anymore because there's no time, there's no way. . . And I feel so much sadness. . .'
	Low sadness	'Today our thoughts go to this mother and her little angel who will forever watch over her'.
	Neutrality	'No mother should be left alone. Care, nurturing, assistance'.
	Lower anger	'Yet what remains of this story is the squalor of a cold, distant hospital practice entrusted to protocols'.
	High anger	'That mom #itcouldbeme, and this makes me furious'.
Deconstruction of stereotype	Yes\No	'This sick dialectic of sacrifice at all costs, of breastfeeding at all costs, of the complete and dehumanizing flattening of requests and needs, must end'.

This decision is justified by findings regarding the capacity of these two discrete emotions to enable individuals to respond adaptively to environmental changes and challenges with different response patterns [68–70].

The coding process for this category followed specific and meticulous steps, including the identification of specific elements useful for assessing the actual emotional activation of the expressed emotion within the text.

- 'Activation cues': These are elements that help infer whether the post exhibits emotional activation or not. These include the post's length (the shorter the post, the lower the emotional activation), repetitions, ellipses, exclamation or question marks, capital letters, bold letters, and positive or negative emojis.

After the assessment of emotional activation, specific elements that help discern the intensity and the direction of the expressed emotion were sought within the text. One point (negative for sadness, positive for anger) was assigned to the text for each element present within it. If the text reached a maximum of two points in absolute terms, the post was categorized as 'low activation'. However, if the score ranged from three to five points in absolute terms, the post was categorized as 'high activation'.

- 'Semantic Indexes': Specific words or phrases used within the text help discern the prevailing emotion: 'I am angry', 'this thing makes me furious' (other offensive or derogatory languages), or 'crying', 'tears', 'depressed', 'pain' . . . ;
- 'Formal indexes': Indicate the writing style and mannerisms: profanity, sarcasm, irony, use of punctuation and capitalization. . . ;
- 'Attenuators\Accentuators': These are useful in the discernment of the level of the exhibited emotion (high\low) and they include elements such as 'a little', 'a lot', use of conditionals, 'very', 'quite', 'truly', and so on [72];

- ‘Emotional-temporal Indexes’: They refer to elements that help infer if the expressed emotion is related only to the moment narrated or if it is persistent in time after the event, ‘I have the strength to speak about this after 50 days’.

*Deconstruction of stereotypes:* Analyzes the absence or presence (dichotomous response) of opinions contrasting with the traditional ideal and expectations of motherhood, especially in terms of ‘intensive mothering’ [36], forced selflessness, and breastfeeding as the only way to be a ‘good mother’.

Data were processed by using the software SPSS (version 25). The variable distribution is shown in Table 2. Most of the comments’ authors are women (89.1%), followed by groups or pages (8%), and only in a few cases men (2.1%) or ‘other’ (0.8%). Considering the activism level, we found that the most frequent type of activism is complaint (39.6%), followed by proactive solutions (21.3%), systemic denouncement (20.3%), and local denouncement (18.8%). Moreover, the level of emotional arousal is generally positioned around a medium level being the most frequent Neutral one (32.0%), followed by Low sadness (24.1%) and Low anger (20.1%).

**Table 2.** Data concerning the variable distribution.

Variable		F	%	Cumulative %
Author gender	Women	345	89.1	89.1
	Men	8	2.1	91.2
	Groups/Pages	31	8.0	99.2
	Other	3	0.8	100
Source	Facebook	196	49.5	49.5
	Instagram	200	50.5	100
Activism level	Complaint	156	39.6	39.6
	Local denounce	74	18.8	58.4
	Systemic denounce	80	20.3	78.7
	Proactive solution	84	21.3	100
Emotional arousal	High sadness	49	12.4	12.4
	Low sadness	95	24.1	36.5
	Neutral	126	32.0	68.5
	Low anger	79	20.1	88.6
	High anger	45	11.4	100
Deconstruction of stereotypes	Present	117	29.7	29.7
	Absent	277	70.3	70.3

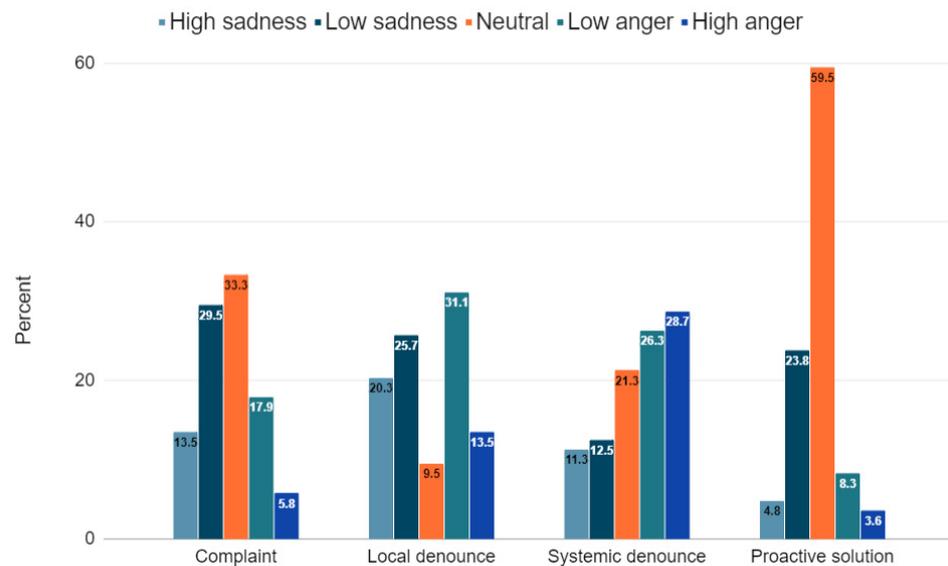
### 3. Results

As outlined in the hypothesis, the following section proposes the results concerning the relations among the variables.

In line with the assumptions from H1, the chi-square test highlights a specific pattern of association between activism level and emotional arousal (Figure 1), expressed in comment [ $\chi^2(12) = 91.24; p < 0.000$ ]. The analysis of adjusted residuals (AdR) has been used to highlight categories which can contribute to the significance of differences among variable levels. The statistical significance of the chi-square enabled us to refuse the null hypothesis and verify that online activism and emotional arousal are related (H1).

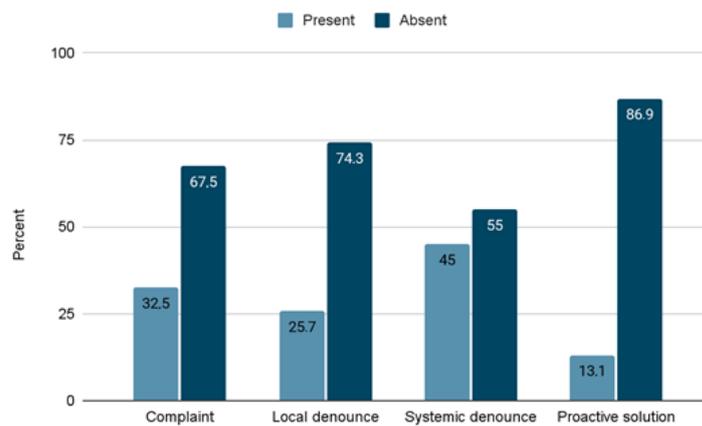
Specifically, in online mothering experience, the complaint activism level is more frequently associated with Low sadness emotional arousal (29.5%) than the expected values, and less frequently associated with High anger (5.8%). Similarly, local denouncement seems to be more frequently associated with High sadness (20.3%) and Low anger (13.5%), while it is less frequently associated with Neutral arousal (9.5%). Systemic denouncement seems to be more frequently associated with High anger (28.7%) and is less frequently associated with Neutral (21.3%) and Low sadness (12.5%). Finally, coherently with previous studies [58], more constructive and action-oriented forms of participation seem to be related to a more ‘regulated’ emotional state since the proactive solution results are more frequently

associated with Neutral emotional arousal (59.5%), while they are less frequently associated with Low anger (8.3%), High anger (3.6%), and High sadness (4.8%).



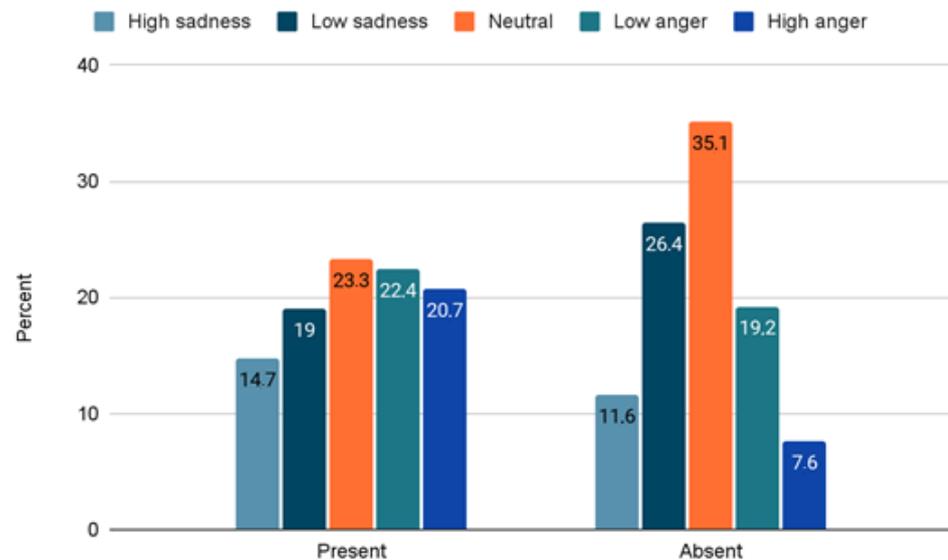
**Figure 1.** Percentage distribution of emotional arousal across the four activism levels.

As for the assumption related to H2, another chi-square test (Figure 2) was run [ $\chi^2(3) = 21.24; p < 0.000$ ]. The statistical significance of the chi-square test enabled us to reject the null hypothesis and verify that activism level and deconstruction of stereotypes are related (H2). The relative percentages highlight that systemic denouncement is more frequently associated with Present deconstruction of stereotypes than expected values (45%), while proactive solutions are more frequently associated with Absent deconstruction of stereotypes (13.1%).



**Figure 2.** Percentage distribution of deconstruction of stereotype across the four activism levels.

In line with the assumptions from H3, a chi-square test was additionally worked and a specific pattern of association between the deconstruction of stereotype and emotional arousal (Figure 3), expressed in comment [ $\chi^2(4) = 18.73; p < 0.001$ ] was found. The statistical significance of the chi-square enabled us to reject the null hypotheses and to accept that the deconstruction of stereotypes and emotional arousal are related (H3). In particular, the results highlight that the deconstruction of stereotypes is more frequently associated with High anger (20.7%), while the Absent deconstruction of stereotypes is more frequently associated with Neutral emotional arousal than the expected values (35.1%).



**Figure 3.** Percentage distribution of emotional arousal observed in the cases of a presence or absence of deconstruction of stereotype.

#### 4. Discussion

In everyday life, news, episodes, and cases can promptly enter into public opinion and (social) media agendas, especially when these happenings fit with news value, such as the discordance from well-established and expected situations. The case study we focused on steps from such a situation: a newborn's death in the hospital where he was just born, under the load of his feeding mother, represents a widely unexpected event when thinking of a more due 'happy ending'. The following choral indignation gave life and found a common and trustful recipient in the hashtag movement #itcouldbeme.

In line with the social literature about this phenomenon during a very strict time, a great concern about the case and related issues was set through a bottom-up pathway [61,65], thus encouraging and extending the debate through social media on the plague of obstetric violence [11]. At the core of this movement, disclosure practices were characterized by different engagement levels and emotional nuances. To better understand some of these dimensions and their possible connections, a considerable corpus of online posts from Facebook and Instagram was gathered, codified, and analyzed by three main variables, that is, the activism level (stressing four types of engagement and agency), the emotional arousal (set in five levels shifting from high sadness to high anger), and the deconstruction of stereotypes (if occurring).

The statistical analysis enabled us to reject the null hypothesis and to accept assumptions deriving from H1, H2, and H3, thus confirming the existence of relations among the involved variables. Firstly, the different levels of activism were differently associated with emotional elicitation. The first level of activation, rather identified in a complaining attitude, meets the sadness pole, specifically in its lower level, whereas it is less matching with the anger pole, especially in its higher level. The second level of activation, that is local denouncement, is again related to the sadness pole (both levels) as well as to low anger. The third level, defined as systemic denounce, is specifically associated with the anger pole, in both levels. The fourth one, implying efforts to promote concrete solutions, is associated with a neutral activation. These results show a rather defined trend: while the less-engaged activation levels, being founded on a subjective complaint or on a denouncement concerning personal happenings, are more associated with the sadness pole, the further level, being oriented on a more general denouncing attitude, is specifically accompanied by the anger elicitation. These trends can be better comprehended in line with the literature about discrete emotions, which is considered to contain specific information about one's relationship with the environment, thus enabling one to respond adaptively to

environmental changes [68–70]. As a matter of fact, emotional approach coping is widely acknowledged as an effort to manage adverse circumstances in online peer groups too [73]. Furthermore, in line with the literature on e-participation, these results pointed out how the presence of moderated and regulated negative emotions can promote forms of concrete prosocial participation, also implying forms of direct responsibility assumption [58].

While anger occurs when there is someone or something to blame about perceived threats or injustices, sadness is felt when something of importance is lost, with any identifiable responsible target [74–76]. As a consequence of their different natures, anger shows systematic attempts to regain control by shifting attention to the threat and physiological arousal in preparation for a response such as an attack, whereas sadness slows the cognitive and physiological systems in attempts to regain energy and try to adjust to the loss [77]. These different pathways can also be fully understood by taking into account the graduated levels of certainty characterizing the interpretation of the emotion-evoking event, respectively, high and low in anger and certainty [76,78]. Since the experience of uncertainty is known to produce systematic thinking [79,80], sadness may plausibly stimulate more deep processing than feelings involving appraisals of certainty, such as anger [81] and contempt, mitigating more concrete intentions. This composite frame can allow for clearer the associations between low activation and sadness as well as the associations between higher activation and anger.

However, the last activation level showed a rather autonomous pathway, being strictly associated with a neutral emotional activation, thus implying that more engaged levels of activation can be promoted by anger, whereas proactive engagement is associated with a neutral attitude. This last result can have a twofold motivation, deserving additional insights: (a) a certain ‘detached’ attitude can lead toward a more polished positioning, enabling the online user to make a step beyond the denouncement level; (b) some posts just focus on the claim for justice, being less involved in disclosure practices.

Additional interesting associations were found between the activation levels and the efforts to deconstruct the stereotype of IM, presenting mothers as sacrificed ‘super beings’. The most significant results emphasized a match between systemic denouncement and deconstruction, as well as between proactive stance and an absence of stereotyped deconstruction. A denouncement concerning social, cultural, and political scenarios is accompanied by a more specific fight against socially preconstructed contents, thus emphasizing both the overall online disclosure as supporting social practices [26] and the specific refusal to adhere to pre-constructed parental models, making use of denouncement activation level to support the counter-narrative concerning mothering [31]. In the most performative acts of e-participation, such as petitions and concrete proposals, the association with the absence of this socio-cultural proposal can be explained by thinking of proactivity either as a specific practice, surgically oriented on a legislative level, or as a less rhetoric and more regulated discursive style [82].

Having a focus on the deconstruction of stereotypes when related to emotional arousal, the main results emphasize an interesting trend: adhering to a deconstructing position is associated with a spread of emotional arousal, especially with the anger pole, whereas missing adherence to this counter-narrative is mostly related to neutral activation. These results confirm the massive presence of discrete emotions, especially anger and sadness, in hashtag movements having a social scope [59]; in addition, they offer a clear insight into the possible relations between a social positioning aimed at contrasting preconstructed contents and emotional activation, implying again anger as a more engaged and activating emotion [77,81]. Alternatively, not adhering to this social effort implies a less emotionally engaged attitude [82].

Given the overall results, #itcouldbeme represents a hashtag movement taking its first steps from a specific and dramatic episode but going beyond the specific contents related to the case. This claim emphasizes the importance of hashtag movements as an activism opportunity, where the disclosing practices and the several levels of activation can represent essential coping strategies [61,83] as well as valuable inputs for reciprocity

in online reservoirs [44]. In line with the theoretical references concerning disclosure and activism, overall emotional elicitation was found to be an essential feedback [58]. However, deep and differentiated associations with discrete emotions emerged, implying a more 'reacting' nuance in anger and a more 'slowing' attitude in sadness. Together with this emotional focus, a new sociocultural proposal is shouted in an effort to overcome the stereotypical contents related to IM and to offer a precious contribution to the wider rhetorical counter-narratives about mothering [31]. Far from being identified as just an emotionally driven movement, activation is also related to a neutral attitude, especially in its proactive nature. In other words, whereas most activation levels are emotionally charged, the efforts for concrete outcomes present a minor activation.

Beyond the specific associations, the empowering nature of the hashtag movement can be widely acknowledged as a source of activation, taking the form of (a) personal narratives, complaints, and local denounces. When compared with other studies merging the internet, empowerment, identity, and participation [54], this study emphasized the importance of the individual level of empowerment as specifically connected to community narratives and collective consciousness-raising; (b) systemic denouncement and counter-narration when referring to the neo-mothering conditions, offering multifaceted reactions and contributing to proposals of a new socio-cultural sensitivity about these matters, thus improving the interpersonal and social levels of empowerment; (c) 'moral contagion' when public situations of health and well-being are at stake together with group-identity-based motivations to share moral-emotional content, offering new contexts of investigation for the MAD model [57].

## 5. Conclusions

This analysis of a case study concerning online positions converging in a hashtag movement of social denounce allowed us to prove the importance and interconnection among different topics, mainly organized around two wider research fields related, respectively, to the ambivalent nature of online mothering and the dynamics of online participation. To our knowledge, this work represents a first effort to match the cognitive, social, and emotional spheres related to the social sharing of subjective experiences. The statistical significance of the relations among the included variables sheds light on some points and encourages the authors to again engage with these matters.

This work presents some weaknesses, which are mostly related to the limited conditions of data gathering—only posts from two social networks, even if popular, in a restricted timespan and depending on the algorithms of the social networks. In addition, we focused on a hashtag movement specifically born after a news event, making our results mostly related to the Italian background. Future research implying a comparison with similar movements in other cultural contexts could enhance the understanding of some included variables. In addition, future research should investigate if the feeling of loneliness, and the consequent denouncements, increased after the COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which several restricting measures were applied, and may continue to be applied, in hospitalization.

However, this work can be framed in the wider research field concerning the psycho-social conditions of mothering and, more generally, health problems affecting specific categories and the consequent use of online sharing and e-participation as increasingly wide practices. Nevertheless, the codifying procedure we outlined and the results we obtained can offer implications in several domains: (a) offering data and insights for detecting and managing, through both automatic tools and signaling systems, risk and protective situations related to several health issues, reported violence, and psycho-social menaces to health and well-being, as is already happening for other relevant social issues [84]. To the best of our knowledge, no specific tools are devoted to support and sharing of perinatal experiences. These networks could also represent inputs for educational interventions to promote peer and top-down virtuous interactive practices in online participation; (b) on the professional side, a deeper focus on new mothers' needs and their emotional activation

should be set, even in conditions that are not referred to as post-partum depression. Public services could improve the psychological assistance aimed at specifically supporting and preventing emotional and social distress; (c) on the management and political side, these results could promote clear and shared good practices to improve in the departments of gynecology. Specifically, taking into account the new mothers' needs should imply the presence of interdisciplinary teams as well as more sensitive departments, where partners (and/or strict relatives) could take a proactive role, thus contrasting feelings of loneliness.

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