

Mums' Groups and the Patriarchy: How online parenting communities reinforce patriarchal expectations of mothers.

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Abstract:

This paper explores the positive and negative implications of mothers using online parenting communities on Web 2.0 platforms such as blogs, forums and Facebook. I will argue that while there is evidence that shows these communities are a source of support for most members, there is a negative side that perpetuates patriarchal motherhood and traditional gender norms that can have a harmful effect on the users and how they interact within these communities. By reviewing studies based on the interactions within the forum Mumsnet as well as the act of Sharenting on Facebook and Dad authored blogs, I argue that there is a culture of competitiveness and elitism among mothers, driven by white culture and patriarchal traditions within these communities, further engraining these ideals into the community.

Key Terms:

Patriarch, online communities, forums, Web 2.0, motherhood

Since the late '90s, parents have been engaging in online parenting communities via chat rooms, forums and, social media sites such as blogs and Facebook (Scheibling, 2020, p.472). These platforms have provided a space for parents to share experiences and get advice or support. While parents garner support from such platforms, there is a dark side to online parenting communities that often reinforces patriarchal parenting styles (Freidman, 2010, p3.52), lacks diversity, and promotes the ideals of "Intensive Mothering" (Gibson, 2019 as cited in Hays, 1998). They also celebrate the "Super-Dad" simply for being involved (Scheibling, 2020, p.486). The result of these ideals is often a culture of "Sharenting" (Steinberg, 2017, p.842), marked by competitiveness, and superiority (de los Santos et al., 2019). Members and their interactions within online parenting communities are not always about seeking or giving support but often reinforce patriarchal expectations of mothers. There is a culture of competitiveness and elitism among mothers, driven by white culture and patriarchal traditions within these communities, further engraining these ideals into the community.

The rise of information and communication technologies opened new possibilities for expression within communities (Chua et al., 2014, p.201). The internet in the late '90s saw a surge in online forum-based communities (Scheibling, 2020, p.472) which became more tangible and socialized with the inception of Web 2.0 technology (Chua et al. 2014, p.203). In this online space, the possibilities of forming communities are extended by eliminating the issues of proximity, giving users a chance at finding their own community and sense of belonging (Delanty, 2011, p.207). These communities became a critical source of support, especially to parents who feel isolated (Pederson & Smithson, 2010, p.91). Many platforms also encouraged mother-centric parenting forums and the "Mummy Blog". Mummy blogs and forums create a space for mums to find solace and support in shared experiences of frustration, boredom, coping strategies and "mum-guilt" (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p.2). No longer bound by time and space, mothers became more social in online communities because they can interact and contribute despite the time-consuming demands of parenting (Friedman, 2010, p.354-356). Early mother-centric forums provide a good example of how mothers can build a supportive online community.

Forum-based communities such as Mumsnet provide an unrestricted place for mums to freely post about their lives and experiences as mothers, providing and receiving support (Pederson & Smithson, 2013, p.88). While early examples of mother-centric blogs and forums like Mumsnet tend to show mothers focusing only on the positive aspects of motherhood (Therriault, 2014, p.49-50), there has been a shift in the diversity of experiences being shared by mothers to be more open and honest (de los Santos et al., 2019). Gibson (2019) ascertains that mothers can freely publicise their maternal identity online, and Mumblogs and Facebook are the most common places where users feel safest to share their experiences. Facebook has been a positive force for mothers in online communities, giving a voice to those who may not be literarily apt enough to write a blog themselves (Gibson, 2019). However, bubbling under the supportive and freeing surface of online parenting communities is a culture of comparing, Sharenting, and elitism tied to the patriarchal ideals perpetuated within these communities.

These communities aim to empower mothers in their parenting journey, however, often the elitist ideals dominate reinforcing the impossible expectations of the perfect parent (Friedman, 2010, p.355). A study by Pederson and Smithson (2010) suggests that online parenting communities do provide valuable support for mothers, especially those without strong

ties to their local community or family. The same study, however, highlights the ambiguous nature of such support. Interactions within online parenting communities have been criticised for not providing adequate support of the same value as face-to-face interactions for a mother in need (Friedman, 2010, p.360). Still, despite this, mothers are constantly seeking information and support online (Friedman, 2010, p.352). The more that women need their identity as a mother confirmed and validated in online communities, the more they use online communities and social media such as Facebook. Their expectations of other members can be unrealistic often requiring comments and likes to meet their emotional demands (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2017, p.285). This need combined with the unmoderated nature of these communities leads to confrontational and opinionated debating (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p.1) as well as anti-social behaviour in online communities. This kind of behaviour includes self-promoting actions such as seeking social support more than providing it and responding irrationally to situations when positive attention has not been received (Carpenter, 2011, p.486). The nature of these behaviours leads to members performing a persona reserved only for interacting in these communities and perpetuating the perfect mother myth.

Mother-centric online communities tend to set ideals of contradictory standards resulting in judgment and condemnation (Orton-Johnson, K, 2017, p.2). Historically, the media and now social media, idealises an unrealistic and unattainable version of motherhood (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). Within online parenting communities a sub-set of classes and values are determined by how successful a mother is, hinging on their ability to be well-groomed, well dressed, and seemingly happy and organized (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p.3). Exposure to this reinforces intensive mothering and promotes comparison and competition in mothers (Chae, 2014, p.503). Intensive mothering is when a mother centers her identity on being always nurturing and never selfish (Hays, 1998 as cited in Gibson, 2019). The intensive Mum lives a highly organized existence and centers her focus on her children all day ensuring they are happy and healthy by meeting their every single need immediately, and never losing her cool or raising her voice. She is called a “myth” by critics of this idea (Douglas & Michaels, 2005) as well as any parent who lives honestly. Perpetuating this myth, are mothers who engage in over-sharing of personal information and images of their children, referred to as “Sharenting” (Steinberg, 2017, p.842) to attract likes and comments. Sharenting is conducted by 82% of parents who use social media with 28% of mothers admitting they feel pressure to only post content that makes

them, and their children look good (Auxier et al., 2020). In 2014, Therriault's study implied that mums tend to focus solely on the positive aspects of motherhood, maintaining the ideals of the intensive mother. In 2019 a similar study by de los Santos et al. (2019, p.92) it was found that mothers are more likely to discuss the pressures of those societal expectations and express negative emotions about motherhood as time and online parenting communities evolved, however, they were still more likely to express superiority rather than empathise with each other. Therriault (2014, p.02) found that mothers check into Facebook more than any other kind of Facebook user and their friends list increases every year. This level of interaction described as “Mommy Facebooking” implies that mothers are unconsciously perpetuating and maintaining societal expectations of what a good mother looks like with each interaction (Therriault, 2014, p48-49). These interactions are peer-motivated to gain social capital (Damkjaer, 2019, p.213-214) by performing the perfect mother identity expected of them and enabling them to cherry-pick the experiences that prove their worthiness in these communities (Therriault, 2014, p49-50). While de los Santos et al. (2019) found that the shift has turned to a more raw and honest approach to sharing and seeking support, there is no indication that the shift has also occurred in the expectations of mothers. Instead, mothers are more likely to compare themselves to others and express their perceived superiority, supporting intensive mothering by claiming to be better than others (de los Santos et al., 2019, p.93). This type of competitiveness seems to only occur in female-dominated communities, which lack diversity, and can have a detrimental effect on other members.

Wang et al. (2002, p.04) ascertains that for an online community to be successful, it needs to cater to a diverse range of people with three fundamental needs being social, functional, and psychological. While we can refer to mother-centric forums, blogs and Facebook groups as communities, they tend not to be diverse enough to allow for other parenting cultures and ideals. Mother-centric group members tend to represent mothers, particularly in blogs, as typically white, middle to upper-class women (Friedman, 2010, p.357). There has been an uprising in fathers creating blogs and other online communities, although their motivations differ from those of mothers. As some fathers transitioned into the 21st century from the breadwinner of the family into the co-parent, taking on their fair share of domestic duties and child-rearing (Coakley, 2016, p4-5), they became celebrated for their efforts regardless of how well they perform (Höfner, Schadler & Richter, 2011, p13). Like Mumblogs, Dad authored blogs tend not to be diverse with

the authors generally being middle to upper-class and white as well (Scheibling, 2020, p487). The lack of diversity and the attitude towards dads being a “super-dad” for doing the most basic of parenting only continues to bolster the patriarchal ways of parenting to solidify the family dynamic of gendered norms for women and men, albeit unintentionally (Scheibling, 2020, p.485). While Dad blogs are usually written by dads to discuss how their life experiences and own role models have helped to shape the parent they would like to become (Scheibling, 2020, p.485), Mumblogs and Facebook groups continue to use the online community platforms to determine if their experiences are normal and to establish themselves as superior (de los Santos et al., 2019). A study of Dad written blogs shows that the idea of a super dad is being challenged and instead Dad bloggers are trying to normalise the involved father as one who is capable and not exceptional (Scheibling, 2020, p.486), however Mums continue to enforce the status quo which negatively impacts members of these communities. A shift from cherry-picking perfect scenes to share, to frequently sharing the negative side of motherhood can have a negative impact on some users by tarnishing the positive aspects of motherhood and parenting communities (de los Santos et al., 2019). Facebook is also used by mothers to make sure they are doing motherhood right, however, in a study on the depressive symptoms of new mothers and their Facebook use (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2017, p.285) it was found that new mothers and their engagement in Facebook had increased depressive symptoms associated with the perceived perfectionism required to partake in these online communities. Rarely do mothers share their feelings of inferiority or admire other mothers directly, instead acting out perfection and superiority to others which is closely linked with feelings of anger or jealousy (de los Santos et al. 2019). This often results in unpleasant interactions with community members which are exacerbated by the lack of visible body language and tone of voice (Friedman, 2010, p.361). The vast difference between the motivations and interactions of men and women in these online communities can be traced to the patriarchal motherhood ideals.

Mothers have been seeking advice, solace, and identity within online parenting communities since the inception of the internet, more so with the rise of Web 2.0 social media and blogging platforms. Within these communities, mothers can get validation that they are doing motherhood correctly as well as seek and provide much needed support for mothers who are isolated. This support, however, often reinforces patriarchal motherhood ideals that see mothers as being perfect individuals. This type of motherhood is quashed by critics as a myth,

however, is still perpetuated in online communities through the motivations and interactions of the members and lack of diversity. Mothers also perpetuate this ideal by comparing themselves with each other and part-taking in Sharenting. The competition created with this behaviour, also elicits feelings of elitism and results in unpleasant interactions and feelings within the online community. Dads are getting involved in online parenting communities more and more, however, they also inadvertently bolster the patriarchal ideals of parenting and gender norms. The positive support shared within these online communities does not always outweigh the negative experiences with mothers still feeling pressure to only share the most perfect versions of themselves online. Members of mother-centric online communities need to be free to drop the act, and only then can the patriarchal ideas of parenting become history.

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