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Handbook of Research on Discourse Behavior and Digital Communication: Language Structures and Social Interaction

Rotimi Taiwo
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

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Chapter 5

Membership and Activity in an Online Parenting Community

Sarah Pedersen

The Robert Gordon University, UK

Janet Smithson

University of Exeter, UK

ABSTRACT

Recent studies have shown that British women, especially mothers of young children, spend a particularly large amount of time online. Many are logging on to parenting websites. This chapter investigates Mumsnet, a large British parenting site, and evaluates how members use and conceptualise the site. A combined method of a questionnaire survey with open and closed-ended questions, and discourse analysis of discussions on the site, was used to explore this. The analysis considers how membership and expertise are displayed and acknowledged in online groups, how people view their involvement with the site, how online and “real life” are segregated or integrated in various ways. The positioning of “lurkers” (those who read but do not post) and of “trolls” (those who post false information or fake identities) is explored within the context of how power is reproduced and challenged in the type of discourse produced in an online discussion forum.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the internet has increased phenomenally in recent years across all social groups and age groups, but recent studies suggest that a new group has become particularly enthusiastic about internet use — women in their 20’s and 30’s are now the dominant users of the internet in the UK (Nielsen/

Net Ratings, May 2007). While teenage girls are using the internet for blogging and social networking, slightly older women are logging on to the many parenting communities on the Internet. Parents, and in particular mothers, are a significant and growing group of Internet users and there are thousands of websites offering to provide advice, resources and products. Allen and Rainie’s 2002 study suggested that 70% of US parents used the Internet compared to 53% of non-parents and that parents are more

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likely to access health, lifestyle-enhancing and religious information. As Rothbaum et al point out in their study of parents' reliance on the Internet to find parenting information, society is becoming increasingly mobile, meaning that relatives and friends may not be readily available to give advice. While the majority of such online sites are provided by parenting experts, with limited possibilities for parents themselves to show their knowledge, there is a growing number of sites where parents can talk directly to parents and offer support and advice themselves.

"Mumsnet" was established in 2000 by a sports journalist and TV producer who had met at antenatal classes. The aim of the site is to 'To make parents' lives easier by pooling knowledge and experience'. The site receives more than one million visitors each month and Mumsnet Talk, the discussion boards, attracts around 20,000 posts every day. The site has been described as an 'internet phenomenon' (*The Daily Telegraph*), 'a virtual shoulder to lean on' (*The Observer*) and the 'daddy' of all parenting sites (*The Times*). Its perceived influence with British mothers has led to scheduled webchats with politicians such as the leader of the main opposition party, the Secretary of State for Health and the Leader of the House of Commons and Minister for Women. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has cited Mumsnet as a 'great Internet organisation'. Not all publicity has been positive, however. In 2006 the parenting author Gina Ford sued the website for libel after negative comments were posted about the methods she advocates.

Both researchers are members of Mumsnet and met on the discussion boards. Permission to link to a survey hosted by one of their universities was given by the owners of Mumsnet, and their dual identity as long-term site members and academic researchers was made clear to all participants. This mirrors the example of previous researchers into online parenting communities (Madge and O'Connor, 2006).

BACKGROUND

With the growth of parenting sites has come a related growth in research into the use and discourse of such sites. In the UK, this growth can also be attributed to a growing concern about the state of parenting and an appreciation of the benefits of such websites from government departments. Madge and O'Conner's research into empowerment of new mothers through the UK-based website BabyWorld focused on the ways the site provided virtual social support and alternative information sources for new mothers. However, they argued that the site reinforced traditional stereotypes of mothering and unequal gender roles. Their research focused on how the website offered parents a safe space in which to communicate, but also enabled them to occupy positions of agency in the production of parenting-related knowledge. Madge and O'Connor concluded that BabyWorld was used mainly by white, middle-class, heterosexual women and that the culture of mothering that emerged from discussions on the site was traditional and conservative. Sarkadi and Bremberg's work on the Swedish website the Parents Network (FöräldraNatet) suggested that use of parenting websites could cross the "digital divide", with lone parents and those with lower levels of education and income finding support from this website. They agreed with Madge and O'Connor that website users believed that the opinions and advice of other parents are more valuable than the advice of experts.

While BabyWorld and the Parents' Network are used by both working-out-of-the-home and stay-at-home mothers, Chan's 2008 investigation of a Hong Kong-based parenting website, HappyLand, focused on the way in which working mothers used this website to perform maternal role identities whilst separated from their children. Using the website mainly to share parenting joys and frustrations, the users were able to act out their gender role identity as mothers whilst physically situated at their workplace. A similar

study of the US site *ivillage.com*, aimed at providing support for women combining paid work and family life, looked at discursive strategies in advice generated on the site, and concluded that the site, set up as a commercial enterprise, promoted “individual consumer-based solutions for a primarily middle-class audience over politics addressing the gendered division of labors” (Worthington, 2005: 43).

Chan’s investigation focused on a small group of users, as did the research of Drentea and Moren-Cross, who explored a group of users of a specific bulletin board of a much larger US-based parenting website. They explored the way in which the community fostered and maintained social capital through three main types of communication: emotional support, instrumental support and community building and protection.

While not based on a parenting website, Hall and Irvine’s investigation of an email-based support group for new mothers in Canada showed many the same attributes of community building, provision of emotional support, information sharing and the provision of validation for the ‘normalcy’ of other women’s mothering experiences. Another, historical, example of communication between mothers comes from the archives of the Co-operative Correspondence Club, a group of 24 mothers who circulated a collaboratively produced magazine in which they recorded and discussed their lives and experiences over 50 years – encompassing the trauma of the Second World War, but also including subjects discussed today in online parenting communities, such as childbirth and divorce (Bailey, 2007).

Despite the description of the majority of such sites as parenting websites, most of the research mentioned above was based on mothers rather than fathers. Indeed, as Sarkadi and Bremberg point out, even in Sweden, with relatively high gender equality and explicit social policies promoting involved fathering, aimed at increasing fathers’ involvement in childrearing, the lack of fathers as members of these parenting websites

and respondents in related research is pointed. They agree with Madge and O’Connor that such lack of involvement indicates the continuance of traditional familial stereotypes online. Whilst it is described as being ‘by parents for parents’, the choice of the name ‘Mumsnet’ acknowledges this state of affairs. Little research has been focused on fathers’ use of parenting websites, although Fletcher et al found encouraging signs of Australian fathers’ readiness to utilize electronic information.

METHODOLOGY

Our approach combines traditional field methods applied to the internet (an online web survey with closed and open-ended questions), together with analysis of online discussion in the website. A survey open to all users of the site was conducted in autumn 2008. In addition, selected “threads” – online discussions – which related to the survey questions were analysed to consider how cultural knowledge, including normative assumptions, common-sense knowledge and cultural tropes, emerge out of people’s everyday descriptions.

Our analysis of the online discussions utilises elements of discourse analysis and ethnomethodology to understand how participants on a website understand their and others’ activities on the forum. What activities are participants doing in their online posts, and what resources are they drawing on to perform these activities (Potter, 2004; Antaki, 2007)? How do these discourses (re)produce or challenge dominance (van Dijk, 1993)? There are methodological problems of applying discursive approaches to chatroom or internet forum data – for example, sequencing issues and timing of responses are obscured on fast-moving threads where people are often replying to a thread which has received other responses as they write. It is difficult to determine the size and composition of an online group since individuals are able to take on multiple identities

with pseudonyms and email aliases that disguise their characteristics and facilitate deception. Despite the acknowledged limitations, researchers are increasingly finding ways of adapting these approaches to online communities. For example, Lamerichs and te Molder (2003) used discursive methods in the analysis of issues of identity in forums, Panyametheekul and Herring (2003) used notions of turn-taking allocation, and Antaki et al (2005) used conversation analysis to consider the management of accountability in online forums. We aim to explicate how internet forum members display their understandings of, and reasonings about, their opinions and activities. As participants describe their lives in chatroom posts, they are also involved in the maintenance of social structures and in the alignment and realignment of the social order (Goodwin 1997; Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005).

Demographics of Survey Sample

There were 391 respondents to the survey. 93% of the respondents were mothers, 0.3% fathers (one respondent), 1.7% were other carers (e.g. grandmothers) and 1% (four respondents) were not parents or carers. Thus our sample mirrored the mother dominance reported by previous researchers, perhaps not surprising in a website called Mumsnet.

The Mumsnet sample appears to be a comparatively older group of mothers, with three-quarters of the respondents aged between 31 and 50. In contrast, the mothers in Drentea and Moren-Cross's sample had an average age of 30 while in the BabyWorld sample 76% were under 35.

The majority of respondents were based in the UK. 82% of these lived in England and 43% of these English respondents lived in either London or the South East. This dominance of the capital replicated the findings of Sarkadi and Bremberg's study, which found that the region of Stockholm was over-represented. 16 respondents lived overseas, most of these being British ex-pats. The

majority (80%) of respondents had one or two children, and in contrast to other parenting sites, only 22.8% of the children were under two, reflecting the wider user group of Mumsnet. Apart from the Swedish study, research into parenting forums has tended to focus on mothers of babies and toddlers. Our findings demonstrate the uses of the Internet by mothers of a wider range of ages and with a wider range of children.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The survey questions, and resulting analysis, were focused around three specific research questions.

1. Membership and Expertise: How do posters construct their and others' membership of a community, and how is "expertise" in parenting and other issues displayed and acknowledged?
2. The nature of online activities: In what ways is an online discussion on this site similar, in participants' opinions, and in advice outcomes, to talking to other parents in real life, and/ or to receiving professional advice or counselling for a problem?
3. Interactions and segregation between "real life" and online communication: How do people use this site for "real life" purposes?

Membership and Expertise

While the site allows official "membership" by subscription, we use the term here in the ways that site users use it – a "member" is someone who sees themselves, and is acknowledged by others, as "belonging" to the site. This concurs with ethnomethodological understandings of membership (e.g. Sacks, 1992; Lepper, 2000; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001), in which membership is displayed in local interaction by speakers' actions

and others' responses to these. Similarly, on this website, "expertise" is taken by participants, and by us as analysts, to be demonstrated by posters' positioning of themselves as experts in a particular area, and by other posters' acknowledgements of this expertise. The speaker's use of, or hint at, an identity category is locally effective (Antaki, 2007). "Expertise" is displayed and acknowledged by how recipients orient to an utterance (Hutchby, 1995), in this case a post. As well as the construction of membership by frequency and acceptability of posting, a "hierarchy" is acknowledged by members, drawing on length of posting, popularity of poster, and on expertise in a particular area, for example breast-feeding, child-birth, human resource issues or religion. While the internet is often lauded as a non-hierarchical space, which facilitates equality of interaction, research on forums regularly demonstrates the re-construction and maintenance of traditional hierarchies – for example Panyametheekul and Herring (2003) demonstrated how participants maintained traditional gender hierarchies in a Thai chat room. In many groups a minority of core members generate the majority of contributions (Nielsen, 1997).

On Mumsnet a hierarchy of frequent, popular posters, 'newbies' (new posters) and lurkers is established.

some kind of "pecking order which makes me feel uncomfortable posting on certain topics/areas or on threads started by certain posters"⁽¹⁾

Threads such as 'Your favourite Mumsnetter' lead to the listings of the names of frequent or popular posters. Smaller groups are established within 'clubs' for particular birth months, or threads that support posters experiencing similar problems, for example with conception, sleeplessness or children with special needs, and members of such groups look out for one another on the

larger discussion boards. In the survey, 36% of respondents agreed that they looked out for posts from certain posters and 30% agreed that they avoided posts by specific posters.

Linked to this was a theme that arose frequently in the survey: the perception that Mumsnet was dominated by cliques. For example, in response to a question asking whether there were any threads that respondents avoided:

Any of the long chat threads like scuttlebuggers or whatever they call themselves. Or the one where they make virtual cups of tea and hand round cakes (weird emoticon)

Another respondent stated:

There is quite a middle class English vibe to mumsnet and it's a bit boring actually – I'm using mumsnet less and less as I find it a bit cliquey.

Thread analysis suggests that there is also a perceived gulf between the more established Mumsnetters and 'newbies', with a frequent thread theme being the complaint that newbies are ignored.

Certain members of Mumsnet have established themselves as resident experts, most commonly by frequently answering queries in one particular area and by making reference to their own work experience. This establishment of expertise is acknowledged by other regular posters and when difficult or complex questions arise in these areas, their advice may be called for:

Extract 1

By OneLieIn Sun 29-Jun-08 22:27:20

I am in a right mess at work and need some HR advice – I can't ask my HR dept as I don't have one really and also they are not on my side.

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Anyone out there to help? please???

ByReady4anotherCoffeeSun 29-Jun-08
22:48:30

bumping you in the hope Flowery is about!

In response to a query about breastfeeding, a poster is directed to the Mumsnet breastfeeding expert:

Extract 2

TinyTimLivesinVictorianSqualor Fri 14-Dec-07 22:08:06

My best advice here is keep bumping til tiktok answers! It's not something I know about tbh, but congrats on the pregnancy anyway.

Unlike some parenting sites, there are no official experts on Mumsnet and any advice given is explicitly understood to be from one parent to another. However, the majority of such experts are understood by members to work in these fields. In her analysis of discussion threads on HappyLand, Chan suggests that the lack of resident 'specialists' such as teachers or counsellors on the website leads to much more of a community atmosphere. While Mumsnet also avoids official specialists, it is interesting to note residents experts have been established by popular acclaim. The majority of the established 'experts' base their status on their work in the field, whether that field is breastfeeding, childbirth, human resource management, medicine, the law or social services. Madge and O'Connor and Drentea and Moren-Cross emphasise the way in which parenting sites offer mothers the opportunity to find support and information from other mothers rather than (the male-dominated) health profession. However, the establishment of acknowledged experts on Mumsnet suggests that, while Mumsnetters look for general advice and support from other parents

via the Internet, they particularly appreciate professional advice sourced from another parent. In this, our findings agree more with Hall and Irvine, who found that their group of Canadian mothers relied heavily on healthcare providers and passed on their advice to others in the group.

The importance of demonstrating appropriate behaviour in online forums has been addressed in recent research. In a context where people cannot use normal interactional cues to determine the "genuine" identity of a speaker, the ways in which posters use structural features of interaction, as well as content of their posts, to demonstrate their validity as members or experts, become paramount. Lamerichs and te Molder (2003) explored how users of a forum display appropriate forum user behaviour in the content of their posts. Antaki et al (2005) showed how posters do interactional work to demonstrate accountability. On Mumsnet, expertise is frequently challenged – sometimes with reference to trolling since long-term members of the site remember a long-running troll who dispensed legal advice, and was 'called for' in a similar way to the examples given above, for some months before being outed and ousted.

The issue of trolls is central to understanding how membership of a site is established. Herring et al (2002) note the limited amount of research undertaken into trolling on discussion forums. They define a troll as an 'individual who baits and provokes other group members, often with the result of drawing them into fruitless argument and diverting attention from the stated purposes of the group'. Their research investigated trolling on a feminist discussion forum and the difficulties for such an online forum to reach agreement about what to do about trolling. Similar debates on the subject of trolling happen frequently on Mumsnet, with disagreements about whether or not trolls should be banned or simply ignored. There is also regular debate on the blurred boundary between a "troll" and a normal poster.

Extract 3

By Marina on Wed 01-Oct-08 13:26:09

Agree there VS, I think there is a grey area where posters get a bit carried away and may unintentionally err into troll territory.

I think poetic licence/exaggeration for effect/parallel existence are pretty common on here and if no-one gets hurt, fine.

On Mumsnet, as well as those calling for the suspected troll to be banned or ignored, other responses are permitted. For example, it is possible for a poster to agree that the original poster probably is a troll, but nonetheless still answer the question in case someone else in the same position is reading – or will read from the archives – the thread. There is a clear consciousness that the archives are being read for advice, presumably because this is something that many of the posters do themselves. Therefore there is an argument that the troll may be bringing up an issue that needs a thoughtful answer, for example discussion about miscarrying or premature births.

There can also be enjoyment of the notion of trolling as a leisure activity.

Extract 4

By Pruners on Tue 26-Feb-08 18.44:58

we were due a good troll-outing

my fave was the one that descended into haiku

By SheherazadetheGreenFacedTroll on Tue 26-Feb-08 18.46:46

i love a good troll hunt, i miss lav and her crazy gun toting ways.

Accusations of trolling are tied into the establishment of hierarchy on Mumsnet. Newbies and less frequent posters rarely accuse someone of trolling, although they may agree when one of the more frequent posters makes such an accusation. Accusations of trolling can thus be used to establish and maintain a poster's position in the hierarchy of Mumsnet.

Extract 5

By LolaTheShowgirl on Wed 01-Oct-08 13:11:49

they get people so emotionally involved in their 'problems' that other genuine posters often get labelled as trolls if their real problems seem so far-fetched but are actually true and that puts the newbies off because all the trust has gone

When accused of trolling, posters may draw on a variety of resources to account for their posting, for example, the poster in extract 6 lists a variety of issues that have arisen on Mumsnet over the years, thus establishing not only her "genuine poster" status, but also that she is not a newbie.

Extract 6

By 3rdwiseman on Wed 04-Jun-08 11:10:30

(not a troll, I know all about cod, the bat, soapy's christmas appeal, the grapes, the tablecloth, the macaroons, the cube of poo etc)

The joint low status in the forum hierarchy of newbie and troll is noteworthy – neither is permitted to post controversially without challenging by regular posters with established identities. In this discussion forum, new posters are expected to demonstrate membership by patterns of posting approved by the regular posters.

Given that Mumsnet claims to receive one million visitors a month it is obvious that the majority of visitors do not post on the discussion boards but

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are instead lurkers. Twenty-four survey respondents identified themselves as lurkers, although the majority of these respondents admitted to posting very occasionally. Lurking rates are highly variable across different communities, although there is evidence to suggest lower rates for health support communities (Preece, Nonneche and Andrews, 2004). In large and very active communities, such as Mumsnet, lurking may even be desirable. One million posters could cause severe problems for the size and speed of the site.

Preece et al identified five main reasons for lurking on discussion boards: not needing to post; needing to find out more about the group before participating; thinking they were being helpful by not posting; not being able to make the software work; not liking the group dynamics. Some of these reasons can be found in the Mumsnet lurkers' responses, in particular, the feeling that there was no need for a response from them because someone else had already answered the question:

Sometimes read others' comments and think "That's good. Can I really add anything else?"

Everyone always says what I want to say but much more eloquently, so I'd just end up posting "what (s)he said" a lot!

Others felt no need to post, perhaps because their questions had been answered already:

if I want to know something I can usually find the same kind of question has been asked before

or because their needs were met purely by reading the discussion threads:

I started just coming on Mumsnet to read advice on particular subjects, and didn't get into the habit of posting.

While no respondent stated that they had problems with making the software work, others did refer to external issues, mainly time-related, that made posting difficult for them:

Frequent interruptions from children

often read without posting. not sure why, perhaps lack of time, or I'm usually doing several things at once and reading posts is quicker/easier than posting

One respondent admitted that she did not post because:

I find coming up with a talk name intimidating.

However, the most frequently given reason for lurking was that of not liking the group dynamics, particularly the already noted perceived cliquiness of the discussion forum. 15 out of 24 lurkers admitted to not posting because of concerns about how their post would be received:

Highly critical/judgemental responses of some posters

Lurking is fun and being jumped on by total strangers can be scary

A lot of the regular posters are very confident in what they write. I feel that if I post something that they don't agree with, then I may be publicly ridiculed.

Afraid of the response. Posts get ignored. To be honest, it's a bit cliquey.

Preece et al also found that, despite not posting, most lurkers identify with a community and think of themselves as members. Our survey supports that finding, with lurking respondents commenting:

given me an identity "mumsnet type (you know)

A sense of feeling part of an on-line community'.

The lurkers' constructions of site identity without posting raises interesting questions about silence and membership in research and natural contexts. This study suggests that lurkers can be understood to be members, albeit hidden ones.

The Nature of Online Activities on this Website

Parenting sites are typically "marketed" as being a meeting-place for parents, and may receive funding for the advice or help they offer to parents. It is therefore relevant to consider the nature of the activities occurring online. In what ways is an online discussion similar, in participants' opinions, and in advice outcomes, to talking to other parents in real life, and/ or to receiving professional advice or counselling for a problem? 40% of respondents felt that the online discussion was similar to talking to parents in real life, 5% felt that it was like receiving professional advice or counselling, 43% felt it was a bit of both, while 13% felt it was similar to neither.

I don't post on contentious issues, just offer advice, ask questions. I only read more opinion based threads. I really dislike confrontation, even via the web, so avoid posting that could cause offence, although I'm often shouting at the screen!

While views were mixed about the exact nature of online activities, many respondents were clear about the importance of the online discussions; there were a variety of comments about the intensity of online activities

I feel a little out of my depth at the moment about someone who has got too deep.....she has scared me to be honest and I am scared for other MNetters as I feel they are being dragged in to deep too.

Moreover, 42% of respondents said that if they had a concern or problem, they were more likely to post about it on Mumsnet than talk to family or friends first (compared to 51% who would talk to friends or family first). 69% said that there were things they talked about on Mumsnet that their offline friends did not know about.

Previous research into parenting websites has emphasised the supportive nature of such sites, and has made connections to the fact that they are used primarily by women. Madge and O'Conner commented on the supportive and encouraging nature of BabyWorld and suggested that, in general, flaming is not found in woman-centred groups; while Drentea and Moren-Cross describe the way in which the community worked quickly to re-establish peace any time a thread was contested. While many of the respondents to our survey commented on the supportive nature of the site, it is clear that a livelier, possibly more aggressive type of posting was seen as part of the Mumsnet 'style'. Trolls were enjoyed for their inventiveness, accusations were made of cliquiness, and witty, educated posts encouraged. Mumsnetters can subscribe to a weekly round-up (by a site member) of that week's most witty posts. Posters who use text speak or write with poor spelling and grammar can expect to receive criticism of their writing style by "gatekeepers" of the site's perceived norms, rather than supportive comments on their problems.

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Extract 7

ByjuSat 18-Aug-07 22:38:43

Dear Dabbles please, I beg you, don't use text-speak. It makes it frightfully difficult to read what you are posting

Extract 8

By Mamazon Thu 10-Apr-08 12:04:50

if someone types in text speak it takes me ages to decipher it I judge them.

I read the post and think that they are clearly a 14 year old on the half term.

or worse, i imagine them to have greasy hair; missing teeth and living in a caravan.

Mumsnet even offers a discussion topic entitled 'Pedants' Corner' where the misuse of apostrophes, grammatical errors in newspapers and letters sent home from school, and the failings of the English language are discussed in great detail.

Throughout the discussion threads there is an expectation that posters will do their best to write not only intelligibly but intelligently if they wish to receive responses. This can be appreciated: several survey respondents commented on the way in which Mumsnet had helped them improve their writing skills. However, other posters can perceive such pedantry as further establishing a dominant clique of well-educated, middle-class English posters. "Dabbles" responded to the criticism of Ju in Extract 7 above by starting her own thread complaining about being picked on for using textpeak.

Extract 9

By Dabbles Sun 19-Aug-07 19:00:13

grr. am just sick of being picking on for using 'u and ppl'

The response to such complaints is often the suggestion that the poster seek out 'other parenting boards' where, it is implied, standards are lower.

Extract 10

By Slouchy Sun 19-Aug-07 19:53:22

Other sites are less judgemental. But not so much fun.

So type your posts in full (typos are allowed though) and quit moaning. Or defect.

This more challenging, witty tone may also account for the survey findings related to satisfactions gained from Mumsnet. Respondents were given a choice of a variety of satisfactions and could select any number of them or detail other satisfactions they found in Mumsnet. By far the most popular choice was not support (64%) or advice (86%) but entertainment, with 91% respondents indicating that Mumsnet was entertaining. Related comments included 'a bloody good larf!', 'fun' and:

Currently enjoying it more than Real Life – and I do have a very happy Real Life

The recurrent focus on quality and grammatical correctness of posting is interesting on a parenting site, which is ostensibly conceived of to support parents, not to critique their literacy skills. It could be argued that this critical gatekeeping by members is an odd sort of support for new or insecure

parents. Existing societal power relationships due to education and social status are routinely reinforced on this website.

Interactions and Segregation Between “Real Life” and Online Communication

In their analysis of personal relationships formed through online discussion groups, Parks and Floyd (1996) found that 60.7% of their sample had formed a relationship with someone they had met for the first time in an online discussion group and that these relationships migrated to other settings, for example using email communication, talking on the telephone or meeting face to face. One-third of their sample admitted to setting up face-to-face meetings, a figure that accords well with the 28% of Mumsnet survey respondents who admitted to going to face-to-face meet-ups with other Mumsnetters, although less than the finding of the *Digital World, Digital Life* study in 2008, which found that 58% of UK respondents had met up with an online friend. Respondents to our survey gave two main reasons for such a step: either to make contact with others in their local area or because they wanted to meet specific posters that they liked online:

To get me out of the house and fill some time while on maternity leave. To meet other like minded people.

A few respondents admitted to the thrill of meeting the unknown:

Because I wanted to challenge myself to go out and meet a bunch of strangers.

The majority of respondents had not attended an organised meet-up. For some this was less a choice than the result of practicalities such as distance or lack of time, but others preferred to

keep their anonymity and a distinction between their real and online lives.

MN isn't really 'real' for me – wouldn't want to necessarily 'know' mumsnetters in RL, seems a bit too involved. I have enough RL relationships to spend my time on.

The benefits of integration or segregation between online and real life activity is often discussed on the boards:

Extract 11 (the original post, and a few of the responses^{2[2]})

Do you admit to coming on here or similar places?

Bytravellingwilburyon Sat 28-Feb-09 20:27:07

I always feel embarrassed and a bit sad if I tell anyone I come on here so I tend not to

Partly because I don't want to be stalked but also because I feel a bit dweeby (real word honest) about it .

Is it just me ?

ByNickytwotimeson Sat 28-Feb-09 20:29:30

I'm afraid I am quite evangelical about mn.

I am a bit sort of apologetic about it though. As you say, don't want anyone to think I am a saddo who sits hooked to the laptop most nights. I am a saddo who is hooked to it all night, but I try to keep it to myself.

Membership and Activity in an Online Parenting Community

I don't use any other forums though – no time!

ByBitOfFunon Sat 28-Feb-09 20:54:41

I talk about it loads, but sometimes I just say "a friend told me...", so maybe that's even sadder! Aww, that's what you all are to me though <<pished hug>>

Bycheesesconeon Mon 02-Mar-09 16:20:33

its my sad little secret and i somehow feel that poeple would think me a 'norman no mates' and im afraid of being stalked not that anyone wld probably find me remotely interesting oh and i am old and kids at school so feel i should really be doing something more enterprising like starting a small organic cheese farm or painting furniture in a distressed manner! or reupholstering my record collection

In these exchanges, we can see that women on this site regularly feel that membership of an online community is somewhat embarrassing, suggesting a lack of real life friends or activity. Despite recent research about the frequency of internet use for this age group of women in particular, many women consider their use of Mumsnet to be inappropriate. This may be linked to the 'entertainment' factor of the site. According to the *Digital World, Digital Life* survey, UK housewives are the most prolific users of the Internet in the world, spending 47% of their leisure time online. However, the key driver of this group is e-commerce rather than entertainment and communication – activities that are more likely to be undertaken online by younger Internet users. The Pew Internet Project report into *Generations Online* (2009) suggests that, unlike teens and those in their twenties, older generations use the internet less for socializing and entertainment and more as a tool for information searches, emailing, and buying products. Mumsnetters' enjoyment of the discussion boards

may therefore strike them as being inappropriate, 'younger' behaviour, not suitable for responsible parents, who should only be using the Internet to search for information helpful to their families. There is a contrast between the frequency of use, and the strong affiliations which many posters (and lurkers) feel for the site, and the reluctance by many to admit to group membership.

Parks and Floyd suggested that the best predictor of whether a poster would form offline relationships was the duration and frequency of their participation in newsgroups and there is evidence that for less-frequent Mumsnet posters, the possibility of a meet-up raised fears that they would not fit in or have a recognisable 'name':

I'm not known, more of a spectator, so would feel like an interloper.

This concern about the intrusion of their online life into their real lives was also revealed by the 35% of respondents who admitted that they were concerned about being recognised by others on Mumsnet. Such fears were not groundless – 15% of respondents had been recognised on Mumsnet by someone in their real life and several gave details of how problems had arisen from this recognition.

I posted about the breakup of my marriage. My husband read my posts – realised it was me and showed his mum and the person he as having an affair

I spoke about my cousin in law visiting us too soon after birth (next day), and she was offended/hurt.

The ex-wife of a boyfriend searched me out after an article in the Telegraph about me. She still regularly lurks and reads things to find out what I'm doing and where I'm going

It has been found that women in both the UK and the US tend to be more concerned about the negative aspects of the internet (*Media literacy audit*, 2006: §6.11; Fallows, 2005). Pedersen and Macafee's (2007) research into British bloggers found that more women than men reported experiencing trouble with family and friends as a result of their blogging, and this is possibly related to the fact that women are more likely to write blogs about events in their personal lives, so-called journal blogs, rather than fact and opinion based 'filter' blogs.

A recurrent theme was the way members of the site both found Mumsnet useful and relevant, in some cases even a lifeline to sanity, yet acknowledged that it also ate up their time. Responses to the survey question about the main impact of Mumsnet often referred to this double-edged concern. It can be seen on threads too:

Extract 12

Bythequietoneon Wed 01-Oct-08 20:53:37

God, trolling sounds so complicated and just too much effort. Who's got the time to sit around coming up with fake stories and lives. For what???? I just don't get it.

Bymorningpaperon Wed 01-Oct-08 20:55:28

I really think we need to spend less time here, and more time washing up

DISCUSSION

Mumsnet is used by mothers for support. In contrast to other parenting sites researched, Mumsnet is used by a wider variety of ages and mothers of older children. This research demonstrates the

"lifeline" nature of the site for many new, isolated or otherwise struggling parents, suggesting that parenting sites provide a vital support at a time when many women become mothers without strong familial or community support networks. The study however highlights the ambiguous nature of such support. There is a hierarchy – established Mumsnetters (who include 'experts'), newbies and lurkers – and newbies and lurkers complain that there are dominant cliques. While Mumsnet is 'by parents and for parents', there are acknowledged experts, and expertise is developed, supported and challenged by members. The analysis highlights the ways in which individual posters orient to a website, construct and maintain membership, and create hierarchies of acceptability, both in terms of who is accepted as a member, and what type of posts are considered appropriate. Posters were aware of the possibilities for misinformation and "trolling", and this site is notable for the relish which members took in the process of information construction and verification. Members of Mumsnet often enjoyed the lively debates, and found this to be a particular strength of a site with gentle moderation and few official experts. As well as support, Mumsnet is used for entertainment, and for development of a particular membership identity – with a posting style more abrasive than on other parenting websites, and a strong focus on wit and literacy.

In both the survey and thread analysis the dominance of a small group of articulate posters led to a perception of cliquiness from those not part of the 'in crowd'; this was a major reason given for not posting on the site, or for avoiding certain topics. The conflation of newbies and trolls in thread challenges is a notable feature of the Mumsnet hierarchy, and the survey comments by lurkers further demonstrate this.

FUTURE TRENDS

This study demonstrates the growing role that online communities play for a wide variety of people. While this chapter has focused mainly on mothers, the findings about the influence of the internet on people's social lives, as a tool for information, and the ways in which social groups are constructed, organised, and in which members and experts become involved and maintain their online identities, are applicable more generally to online communities, and in this way the study adds to the body of knowledge about changing ways of social organising and communication provided by the internet.

Methodologically, in this study, notions of cliquiness, ingroup behaviour, trolls and hierarchies were similarly described in the threads, and in the survey responses. The survey responses by lurkers and infrequent posters were of particular interest as this information would be hard to obtain by analysis of online discussions, but corroborates the discourse analysis of membership, expertise and status within the website. From a discourse analysis perspective, the popularity and speed of posts on threads on this site posed problems for sequential analysis – posters have often not read immediately preceding posts, which are being written and posted simultaneously, but are responding to discussion further down the thread, or directly to the original post. For this reason, some posts related to each other here (e.g. in extract 11) were shown without intervening posts, the responding posts shown can be seen, by their explicit orientation to the question or the poster by name, to be direct responses to the earlier posts, though not appearing as adjacent posts online. In one case (extract 7), the poster started a new thread to respond to another poster's criticism. This is a challenge for any sequential analysis of online discussion, and particularly so for a large, fast-moving site. However, other aspects of a discursive analysis can profitably be applied to online discussion – in this study, notions of reproduction of power and

hierarchy, exploration of members' categories and orientations, and a fine-grained analysis of posters' orientations to other posts, and the accounts participants produce of their activities online.

CONCLUSION

The combined approach of quantitative survey, open-ended survey questions, and a related discursive analysis of forum posts, provide a detailed understanding of how one particular parenting community is used, and adds to the body of knowledge of online communication and interaction. A picture arises of an environment that offers its predominantly female users support, entertainment and advice, although this support is limited by the perceived dominance of a clique and by group membership norms and hierarchies, including acceptable ways of posting depending on "status" in the group's hierarchy, and the requirement for the poster to deliver well-written entertainment at the same time as seeking advice. Distinctions between the nature of this parenting site and others were observed by posters, and comparison of this website analysis with other similar analyses corroborates the unique nature of each website, with the development of particular norms and expectations.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Discourse Analysis: An approach to the analysis of naturally occurring talk that considers the social actions and consequences achieved by the words' use, and the resources which participants employ to achieve these actions.

Discussion Boards: An online bulletin board where users can leave messages and receive answers.

Lurker: Someone who reads posts on a forum but never or rarely posts.

Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA): A method for locating and analysing the locally used, invoked and organised membership categories in everyday conversation.

Mumsnetter: A user of the Mumsnet discussion boards.

Newbie: A new poster on a forum.

Troll: Someone who posts under a fake identity, posts information they know to be false, or who deliberately posts information to cause trouble.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Two types of qualitative data are used in this chapter. Free text survey responses are shown in italics, data taken from the talk boards is shown as numbered extracts in italics, with speaker's name and post time.
- ² See note in Discussion section about sequential organisation of threads for analysis of this website