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‘It took a lot to admit I am male on here’. Going where few men dare to tread: men on Mumsnet.

Sarah Pedersen, Robert Gordon University

Key words: Fathers, mothers, Mumsnet, online communities, parenting

Abstract

It may be unusual to consider men as a marginalised group, but the male users of the UK parenting forum Mumsnet are a very small minority. While Mumsnet states that it is ‘by parents, for parents’, the vast majority of the users of its discussion boards are women and Mumsnet has a growing feminist voice. This chapter investigates the motivations of the small number of men who use the site. It argues that the men use Mumsnet because they wish to be seen as parents rather than fathers and because they are attracted by the variety and quality of discussion on Mumsnet. However, not all users of Mumsnet are welcoming and thus the men have to decide whether or not to ‘out’ themselves as men. Just like female posters on male-dominated communities, male posters on Mumsnet adapt their behaviour in order to gain acceptance. They make considered decisions on whether or not to reveal their male identity, choose carefully which discussion threads they join and adapt their use of language. It is argued that, whether they are male or female, minority users of online communities adapt to conform to the dominant culture.

Sarah Pedersen is Professor of Communication and Media at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen. Her research interests are focused on the gendered use of social

media and the use of media for political purposes. She has published on subjects as diverse as blogging, social-networking sites, Mumsnet, the suffragettes and the Scottish Referendum.

Introduction

It may be unusual to consider men as a marginalised group, but the male users of the UK discussion forum Mumsnet form a very small minority. While Mumsnet states that it is ‘by parents, for parents’, the vast majority of the users of its discussion boards Mumsnet Talk (which has 4.2 million monthly unique visitors) are women. Indeed, Mumsnet has a growing feminist voice (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). The latest statistics from a Mumsnet census conducted in the autumn of 2013 show that men make up 16% of all users of Mumsnet but only 2-5% of core users.¹ This chapter, which has been researched in collaboration with Mumsnet, investigates the motivations of these male users. It argues that the men use Mumsnet because they wish to be seen as parents rather than fathers and because they are attracted by the variety and quality of discussion on Mumsnet. However, not all users of Mumsnet are welcoming and thus the men have to decide whether or not to ‘out’ themselves as men and which discussions to enter.

Previous research into minority gender behaviour on online communities has tended to focus on women’s use of male-dominated sites such as Wikipedia or IMDb, possibly because of a lack of female-dominated sites online. It has been suggested that women may be hesitant to contribute to, or even be flamed out of, such sites, and that to be successful they might need to adopt more masculine ways of posting. Mumsnet

¹ Statistics given in personal correspondence with Mumsnet 9th December 2013

offers the perfect opportunity to look at this question from the other side – men posting on a female-dominated forum. In addition, this is a forum with a robust posting style, a tolerance of behaviour such as flaming and swearing, and an appreciation of witty entertainment, all of which have previously been identified as male online behaviours. This leads to the question – if women demonstrate behaviours previously characterised as male on Mumsnet, how do men behave?

Literature review

While there is a growing body of research related to women's use of online communities devoted to parenting (Dunham et al 1998; Miyata 2002; O'Connor and Madge 2004; Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005; Madge and O'Connor 2005, 2006; Sarkadi and Bremberg 2005; Chan 2008; Brady and Guerin 2010; Pedersen and Smithson 2010, 2013) there is less research into men's use of such forums. Despite the description of most of such sites as 'parenting' communities, they are mainly used by women. Even in Sweden, with relatively high gender equality, the lack of fathers as members of these forums is pointed (Sarkadi and Bremberg, 2005). Those men who do post on the sites may find themselves criticised for violating the supportive function of such communities, which are seen by most users as an almost exclusively female domain (Brady and Guerin, 2010). This lack of involvement may indicate the continuance of traditional familial stereotypes online, where fathers are frequently seen as an inadequate source of support (Brady and Guerin, 2010). It is suggested that, as the traditional gatekeepers for their family's health, women are more likely to search for information about this subject and more likely than men to put such information to use (Stern et al 2012).

In contrast, men are more likely to use informal sources of support and advice, for example family, friends and co-workers (Lee et al 2013). Fathers might also rely on their female partner to 'pick out' relevant pieces of information from the many books, pamphlets and websites available rather than read through them themselves because they feel that such information is aimed at mothers (Lee et al 2013).

However, in a changing society, fathers are becoming more engaged with parenting and there is evidence that some now want direct access to parenting information on topics such as how to support their partner, relationship dynamics, or how to solve problems relating to their child's sleeping or eating (Lee et al 2013). Most importantly, they may wish to share experiences specifically with other fathers rather than being included in wider parenting classes, which tend to focus on the experience of mothers. Some studies report that fathers or fathers-to-be have responded positively to men-only parenting and ante-natal classes where men can share experiences with other fathers and can express fears, for example about the birth, without alarming their partners (Friedewald et al 2005). However, one of the problems of such classes is that fathers need to fit them in around busy lives where work may take them away from home frequently (Lee et al 2013). Access to father-to-father communication online may be a solution to this problem.

Men can also find themselves relegated to being the secondary parent. Salzmann-Erikson and Eriksson (2013) found that men can feel invisible, disregarded, patronised and insulted in their encounters with healthcare workers who, they feel, see them as less skilled than mothers. They suggest that men who feel slighted by traditional healthcare support may then turn to the Internet where they can find, not

just information, but also emotional support and a place for self-reflection on what it means to become a father. Fletcher and St George (2011) agree that fathers use fathers-only online communities to make their fathering more 'visible' and to encourage each other to engage more confidently in fathering. Several research projects suggest that a common and important motivation for fathers seeking and offering support via the Internet is the ability to contact other fathers in similar situations and to express their feelings and fears about fatherhood anonymously (Nyström and Öhring 2008; Fletcher and St George 2011; Salzmänn-Erikson and Eriksson 2013). However, it should be noted that most of the research projects discussed here relate to fathers-only online communities rather than fathers making use of general parenting or mother-dominated forums. In fact, the community investigated by Fletcher and St George (2011) – a fathers' chat room on an Australian parenting-information website – was riven by disagreements about who should be allowed to use the chat room. Were mothers' contributions welcome? For some participants, the purpose of the chat room was for fathers to learn from and encourage other men, while others felt that they could also learn from the contributions of mothers. Brady and Guerin (2010, 21) also found tensions between male and female posters on a parenting website and an 'us and them' mentality. Thus the focus of this chapter – to investigate why and how men use a female-dominated parenting online community – differs from previous research in this area. Previous research suggests that fathers appreciate and seek out men-only support groups to discuss parenting, whether these are off or online. However, the men who participate in Mumsnet are consciously choosing to enter a female-dominated community (they can hardly be unaware of this situation given the name of the community) and actively seek out discussion with mothers.

Research has also been conducted into *how* fathers communicate online. Fletcher and St George (2011) suggest that features of fathers' online communications include empathy, self-disclosure and humour, and that advice is often given through the recounting of personal experiences. A project investigating the communication features in an online community for fathers of children with spina bifida (Nicholas et al 2003) also found the use of humour as an affect-modulating device and identified the use of a story genre and information-sharing as a means of group formation and empowerment.

Previous research has tended to investigate women as the minority group in online communities. For example, research into male-majority sites such as Wikipedia and IMDb (Hemphill and Otterbacher, 2012) suggests that female contributors receive less attention and enjoy less prestige on these sites. It is also suggested that, to be successful, female contributors need to adapt their writing style. Eckert and Steiner's (2013) work on Wikipedia suggests that potential women contributors are particularly alienated by negative interactions, that Wikipedia editors have a reputation of being rude and contentious, which impacts on women's potential contributions, and that this has resulted in a skewed content and a male-dominated knowledge base. There has been concern that women might be 'flamed out' of the Internet entirely (Barak, 2005) and the construction of women-only or women-dominated online communities was seen as a possible solution to this problem. Thus, research into Mumsnet offers the potential of investigating a site dominated by one gender from a different perspective, asking whether or not male users feel confident in their use of a very female-

dominated site, whether they alter the way in which they post or interact with other users, and how female users react to them.

Methodology

Mumsnet was established in 2000 by a sports journalist and TV producer who met at antenatal classes. The stated aim of the site is to ‘To make parents’ lives easier by pooling knowledge and experience’. It is now the largest parenting website in the UK. The site has been described as an ‘internet phenomenon’ (*The Daily Telegraph*), ‘a virtual shoulder to lean on’ (*The Observer*) and – with an interesting use of gendered language – the ‘daddy’ of all parenting sites (*The Times*). Mumsnet’s perceived influence with British mothers has led to webchats with politicians, including the former and current Prime Ministers, and *The Times* newspaper declared the election of 2010 the ‘Mumsnet election’.

Working in collaboration with Mumsnet, a thread was posted on the discussion boards in the summer of 2013 and was active during June and July. The thread was entitled ‘How and why do men use Mumsnet: please help with university research into male use of parenting forums’. During much of this time the thread was ‘pinned’ by Mumsnet to be placed at the head of the list of discussion threads, which was very helpful given the speed and size of the site. The introductory post introduced the researcher, with links to previous research about Mumsnet and the home university webpage to establish credentials, and explained the reasons for the research. The researcher’s dual identity as a long-term site member and an academic researcher was made clear, mirroring the example of previous researchers into both off- and online parenting communities (Madge and O’Connor, 2006; Vincent and Ball, 2007).

Based on the literature, four questions relating to men and their use of parenting communities and Mumsnet in particular were posed and posters (both male and female) were asked to comment on these questions. Fourteen male posters plus a similar number of female posters responded to the questions and debated the wider issue of men on Mumsnet. In all, the thread eventually ran to 497 posts, the majority of which were detailed responses and further discussion of the topic, totalling over 48,000 words. The discussion was then analysed thematically, focusing on the four original questions and separating male and female posters' responses.

The four questions posed were:

1. Previous researchers have found that fathers have a strong desire for information relating to parenting and childcare, but the vast majority of parenting information and programmes is targeted at mothers. In your experience, is this still true?

2. Men report finding themselves dismissed as the secondary parent, by healthcare professionals for example. They are said to feel invisible, disregarded and patronised. Would you agree with this?

3. It is suggested that online parenting forums such as Mumsnet can therefore offer a place for fathers to make their fathering more visible. On these forums, they can also express their feelings and fears about fatherhood in a way they perhaps might not do with people they know in real life. If you're male, do you use Mumsnet in this way?

4. It seems to be generally thought that men need men-only spaces to fully explore

their feelings around fatherhood. But male Mumsnetters consciously choose to enter a female-dominated community. Why is that? And, if you are male, do you also use male-only communities or support groups (on or off-line)?

Findings

This chapter will focus on two main issues: the motivations for male users of Mumsnet, and whether or not they consciously change their behaviour when using the site.

Why do men use Mumsnet?

The most obvious reason for the use of a parenting website is for information and support about parenting, and some of the male posters on the discussion thread did use Mumsnet in that way. For example, one poster explained that he came to fatherhood later in life and therefore his contemporaries had already moved on, while another pointed out that, for him, it was difficult to talk about children at work because it 'marks you out as not a serious player'. Others had found Mumsnet when researching a particular problem. Unsurprisingly for a group of men who used a female-dominated site, there was little appetite for an all-father group, as suggested in the literature, with one poster commenting that he did not want to be part of a 'dads-only' group because of the pressure he would feel to talk about sports. Several of the fathers were the primary carer for their child and therefore felt that a parenting site was more appropriate for them.

Previous research suggests that parenting information is usually targeted at mothers and that some fathers feel a need for information and support focused on the male

experience of parenthood (Friedewald et al 2005). While the respondents to this question mostly agreed with this, it did not seem to be a burning issue for them, with little discussion of this question and posters of both sexes commenting that the situation was the logical result of pregnancy and birth being predominantly a female experience. Some posters also queried whether there was, in fact, a demand for more parenting information aimed at men and whether fathers would use it if it was provided. Several female posters were particularly sceptical, with one describing how her husband had moaned a great deal about there being no parenting literature specifically aimed at fathers, but then had not read the book that she had managed to find. The fact that there is a section of Mumsnet entitled 'Dadsnet' that is under-used (one poster described as 'Death Valley') was pointed out here. Another male poster stated, 'I have tried posting on several parenting sites orientated towards "Dads" but waiting for 3 months for a reply is NOT what I call an active forum'. There was some discussion of the role of mothers as 'information gatherers' in the family, with female posters commenting that it was assumed by both their male partners and wider family that they would be the ones to read the parenting literature and then pass this information on, in an edited form, to their partner. Some even noted that their male partners might ask them to post a query on Mumsnet on their behalf rather than using the site themselves. Such male information-seeking behaviour by proxy has been noted by Lee et al (2013), who found that fathers might rely on their partner to point out relevant passages and sections that seemed appropriate because parenting information was aimed mainly at mothers.

This led one female poster to comment:

... mothering is something that I 'do' whereas I suspect to him [her partner] fathering is what he 'is' and I hadn't made that distinction before, but it would make sense. Nobody ever looked for a book about how to be a better sister, or friend or son. These are just things that we are.... It made me wonder if men and women in general get different messages from society, the media, etc about what being a parent is.

Several female posters agreed with the distinction made in this post. They felt that fathers did not have the pressure on them that mothers did to be 'good' at parenting and that motherhood is presented to women as a 'project' or task that they need to work hard at, while fathers did not 'agonise' over their parenting in the same way. It has been suggested that middle-class parents see their child as a 'project', and that it is the mother in particular whose time, energy, money and emotional commitment will be invested in in this project (Vincent and Ball, 2007). Given the middle-class dominance of Mumsnet (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013) the fact that the female posters felt this pressure is not surprising.

However, not all the male posters on the thread had come to Mumsnet because they were fathers or used Mumsnet for parenting advice. Many pointed out they had been attracted to Mumsnet because of the discussions and debates on other topics. For example, one poster wrote:

I am here for educational and political, as well as social purposes. I am a disability rights activist, an anti-austerity campaigner, a human-rights lobbyist. Any place such as MN that is able to cross so many boundaries and gather

such a diverse range of people with an equally diverse range of views, is somewhere that can generate ideas and debate of (usually) a high calibre, and hence why I am here.

It is perhaps not surprising that Mumsnet attracts non-parents, and it should be noted that it also has many female users who are not mothers. The wider research project into Mumsnet has shown that the site appeals to experienced parents, and others, who are looking for entertainment, debate, discussion and possibly political interaction as well as support and advice about parenting. The Mumsnet posting style is witty and sometimes combative, swearing is allowed but textspeak frowned upon. Some of the most popular discussion topics on Mumsnet are not related to parenting at all, such as 'Am I Being Unreasonable?', Chat or Relationships. Indeed one of the male posters, again not a father, admitted that he first started posting on Mumsnet for advice on a relationship.

Reactions to men on Mumsnet

However, this is where a more negative note entered the discussion. It was stated by some of the female posters on the thread that some men were attracted to the site for the 'wrong' reasons, for example to troll, in particular when posting on the Feminism and Women's Rights threads. These men were described as both self-identified Men's Rights Activists and also 'a certain tiny minority of outrageously annoying male dickheads, who are there specifically to bug women, getting negative attention from them as preferable to no female attention at all'. It was also suggested that some men used the site to stalk previous partners or to chat up women. The posters who made such statements (mostly) made it clear that they were not talking about the men who

were posting on this thread – who they acknowledged as ‘known’ posters – but there was still some combative discussion about these claims between the two groups of posters. There was definitely a feeling from a minority of the female posters that Mumsnet should be a female-only site with one stating:

From my point of view, men cannot possibly be attracted by the same things that attract me. Yes, superficially we could point to the same attributes – clever, honest, knowledgeable discourse – but it means something very special to me as a woman that it comes from other women. I also feel that is quite different where I can support others, that I am supporting other women, rather than men.

Responding to this kind of statement, several of the male posters pointed out that the tagline for Mumsnet is ‘by parents, for parents’. However, one male poster acknowledged that the site had changed over the last few years because of a growing focus on feminist politics and related Mumsnet campaigns. This had changed the focus of the site and attracted a new group of users with different expectations:

MN has accidentally taken on a role as a powerful medium through which women, many of whom would be otherwise isolated at home with children and therefore unheard, can and do speak directly to politicians and the power establishment. That is a very good thing but men cannot and should not be a part of that second role and will not join MN to be a part of that.

The two roles MN plays I think causes a confusion about what MN is and I know anecdotally there are many ‘Dad’ lurkers who feel posting here is not for them because MN is not just about parenting.

This led to a discussion of how the male posters used Mumsnet, with most admitting that they avoided certain areas of discussion, mainly related to Feminism and Women's Rights and Relationships. One male poster stated that he avoided the Relationships threads since he had become embroiled in a thread there and then revealed that he was male: 'The fact I was a man completely changed the way she viewed a long string of posts I had made when she found out. It wrecked the thread and a massive argument broke out'. There was also a feeling among the male posters that they had to 'prove themselves' before being given support on Relationships threads, with one female poster agreeing that 'Men who post on the relationships board ... do normally get a preliminary grilling over whether they do their fair share of housework and parenting because so many of the relationship problems seen on that board involve men abdicating responsibility for those things.' Another male poster argued that male and female posters were treated differently on certain subjects:

I tend to post on threads about people in relationships with those with alcohol problems. A woman posting about her DH's [husband's] drink problems will receive a number of messages, ranging from the compassionate to the robust, about how his drinking is not her fault, the responsibility lies with him to address this etc.... But I've seen men posting on MN about their DW's [wife's] drinking get a very different response. Lots more questioning about his role in the relationship, much more pondering about how there might be something in her/their background that has brought her to this point.

The subject of whether or not men should be open about their gender when posting on Mumsnet was debated in some detail. Some of the men had chosen posting names that

made it clear that they were male, with words such as Dad, Bloke or Male in the name. Others, however, had gender-neutral names and this sometimes meant that they were assumed to be female. Several male posters stated that they had more than one posting name, and they found that they were treated differently depending on whether it was obvious they were male. One said, 'If I post as Dad I get treated differently than if my name is neutral' while others agreed that 'Some posters will judge my words a lot harsher because I am male' and 'I get attacked because I admit I'm male'. It was also suggested by one poster that it was sometimes possible to spot male posters by their style: 'my dh [husband], who used to post occasionally on here... once said to me ... that there were some posters he could tell were male... just by the style of their writing'.

As stated above, previous research has found that Mumsnet is celebrated by its posters for its difference from other parenting communities, evidencing its feminist discussion, wider discussion topics and robust style. However, there was a consensus that male posters do not have the same freedom in posting as female posters, with male posters stating that they made conscious efforts to avoid swearing and to take care with their language. As one male poster commented:

Men on MN I think tend to post in a forthright way (ie less caveats and hedging phrases) but my impression is they do it with a lot less swearing and exhibit less aggression than many women do on MN. I don't think swearing and aggression by men on MN would be tolerated in the same way as it is by women because it would come across as actually quite threatening behaviour.

Discussion and conclusions

Male posters on Mumsnet adapt their behaviour in order to gain acceptance. They make considered decisions on whether or not to reveal their male identity, choose carefully which discussion threads to join and adapt their use of language. They are less likely to make use of the site's liberal attitudes to swearing. They do this because they are aware that some posters would prefer to interact only with female posters, because their gender can lead to accusations of bias, and because of the bad feeling caused by the behaviour of male trolls on some sections of the site. However, male posters continue to make use of the site and defend their right to such use by stressing that the site is stated to be 'by parents, for parents'. All stated that, like its female users, they are attracted to Mumsnet because of the quality and quantity of its discussion, in comparison with online fathering communities, which have far fewer members and limited discussion. However, there was an appreciation of the fact that over the past few years Mumsnet has changed because of a growing discussion of feminism and women's rights. While being very careful not to criticise this phenomenon, and even to praise it, the male users had been left feeling less sure of their place on the site.

Thus male posters on Mumsnet behave just like female posters on the male-dominated forums studied by Hemphill and Otterbacher (2012) and Eckert and Steiner (2013), adapting their behaviour to fit in with dominant norms, trying not to draw attention to their gender, and paying attention to the way they post. Thus a study of Mumsnet suggests that the adaptation of a minority group to the norms of the majority group on an online forum is not necessarily a one-way street as far as gender is concerned – men act in the same way on a female-dominated discussion forum. Whether they are male or female, minority users of such online communities adapt to conform to the

dominant culture, make choices about how and where to post, and may choose to hide their identities and alter the way in which they post in order to make themselves more acceptable to the wider community. A study of a parenting forum such as Mumsnet allows us to study the problem for a new perspective – from that of a male minority.

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