

From “Stroller-Stalker” to “Momancer”
Courting Friends through a Social Networking Site for Mothers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the roles of an online social networking site (SNS) called Momstown.ca in the development of peer support. Interviews with 22 members of Momstown.ca demonstrated that women experience a sense of isolation for a variety of reasons and desperately want to connect with other mothers in a similar situation. Women reported attempts to befriend other mothers through “stroller stalking,” which often led to bad “mommy dates.” Momstown.ca served as a matchmaker by enabling women to court other moms online and face-to-face. We conclude these interactions facilitate momances (deep platonic friendships amongst mothers), but also a sense of community. As a result, women experienced care, camaraderie, and felt connected, not isolated and alone.

KEYWORDS: Motherhood, leisure-oriented sociability, peer support, isolation, community

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Motherhood is arguably one of the most important transitions in a woman's life. Nelson (2009) argued the rapid transition associated with motherhood is unparalleled: "A woman entering motherhood can experience changes in her bodily experience and functions, her emotions and psychology, her sleep and work schedules, the tasks she performs, her social circle, her sense of self, her sexuality and the roles she plays" (p. 12). These dimensions of life are dynamic for everyone, but Nelson argues the speed, ubiquity, and pervasiveness of the changes make motherhood unique among life transitions. Moreover, women increasingly negotiate the transition to motherhood in an "age of anxiety," which can result in a "caught-by-the-throat feeling so many mothers have today of *always* doing something wrong" (Warner, 2005, p. 5, original emphasis). The anxiety surrounding motherhood is presumed to be the impetus for the growing number of women accessing online support groups. This anxiety is caused by increased isolation that mothers face in postmodern society (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). Indeed, demographic research reveals more women return to paid employment after the arrival of children, which means fewer women stay at home full time to raise children (Arendell, 2000). Litt (2000) argued the loss of time spent with other mothers raising young children has resulted in reduced informal support networks and access to advice. Mothers also find themselves geographically distant from female kin, which further reduces social support. Nelson (2009) posited, without a community of mothers with which to interact, women struggle to establish a maternal identity. To this end, Mauthner (1995) argued the extent and nature of relationships between mothers is "critical to the quality of women's experiences of motherhood" (p. 320). Given that approximately 80% of North American women undergo the transition to motherhood at least once in their lifetimes (Nelson, 2009), issues connected to social isolation warrant exploration and understanding from the perspective of mothers themselves. Such research tackles the "conspiracy of silence around ordinary motherhood" (Jackson, 1992, p. 3). In this spirit, the purpose of this study was to explore the roles of an online social networking site called Momstown.ca in the development of social and peer support with a particular focus on leisure and its impact on the social isolation mothers of young children can face.

Literature Review

The culture of motherhood is changing rapidly (Warner, 2005). Whereas in the past, many women (mostly urban and middle/upper class) would be at home raising children in a closely knit neighbourhood filled with other women in a similar situation while simultaneously living close to female kin, today's mothers are more likely to transition into motherhood isolated socially from others. Cultural changes that include women's increased participation in the paid workforce (Gaudet, Cooke, & Jacob, 2011), geographical distance between family members (Postmontier & Horowitz, 2004), and increased rates of single parenthood (Gallagher, 1997) have resulted in many women mothering without tangible and emotional support. This change has occurred despite a wide-spread understanding of the risks that accompany social isolation and motherhood (Mallikarjun et al., 2005; O'Hara, 2010). Indeed, research is clear that the quality of women's experi-

ences of motherhood is inextricably linked to their relationships with other mothers (Nelson, 2009).

Increased Isolation Among Mothers

New mothers without strong social networks report feeling “isolated” and “so alone” (Mauthner, 1999). Contemporary Canadian women have increasingly smaller support systems, particularly those who are already structurally vulnerable due to poverty, mental illness, socioeconomic status, marital status, age, ethnicity, and geographical location (Landy et al., 2009). For those mothers who are married, spousal support can be very important; however, relying solely upon a spouse for social support can be detrimental to both partners, not to mention the relationship itself (Davey, et al., 2006; Scrandis, 2005). Research suggests that facilitating social support is a particularly viable strategy for both preventing and treating postpartum depression (Ugarriza et al., 2007). Yet, research also demonstrates that contemporary Western culture creates a particularly isolating environment for new mothers, void of the social support that is so vital for women and their families (Zelkowitz, 1996).

The lack of social support is complex given that Canadian women have social benefits ranging from job protection to child tax benefits, maternity leaves, and medicare. However, as Zelkowitz (1996) maintains, “such benefits do not insure that a new mother will have adequate rest, as well as instrumental and social support” (p. 397) and research is clear that social support is a key factor in women’s experiences of motherhood, including protection from postpartum depression (Mulcahy, Parry, & Glover, 2012). Whereas many cultures involve extended family and friends (usually women) in the care of the infant that enable new mothers to rest, particularly in the first month postpartum, new mothers in Canada are discharged early from hospitals into support systems that are significantly smaller than in previous generations (Zelkowitz, 1996). Though Canadian women report satisfaction with the continuity of care provided by midwives, midwifery is still not offered in all Canadian provinces and territories, and just 1% of Canadian births are attended by midwives (Wrede et al., 2008).

In addition, there are few, if any, formalized traditions or norms in Canadian culture that provide women and their families with household help, care for older children, and meal preparation. These traditions that occur in other cultures (for instance, in Korea, the *SAM CHIL ILL*, or a 21-day to 5-week rest period, or in Japan, the *Satogaeri bunben*, a period of prenatal and postnatal support) confer a special status to the new mother, thereby recognizing that she is undergoing a significant transition deserving of protection (Postmontier & Horowitz, 2004). Such traditions and rituals facilitated by strong social support systems have been shown to increase self-esteem, confidence, and overall well-being in women who have just given birth, yet Canadian culture is increasingly isolated and individualistic when it comes to raising children (Ugarriza, 2007). These social conditions have left researchers with the conclusion that “postnatal depression is an understandable result of parenting in a hostile world” (Lloyd & Hawe, 2003, p. 1788).

Clearly, social support is a progressively important intervention for mothers (Landy et al., 2009; Leahy-Warren et al., 2011). Levine and Perkins (1997) argued social support fosters “structural embeddedness in a network of human relation-

ships, which may engender feelings of stability and predictability regarding one's social world" (p. 234). Caring relationships, in other words, provide a sense of security for those who belong to them, therein enabling people to carry forward in their day-to-day lives with the understanding that someone is or will be available to support them should they require assistance. Second, Levine and Perkins explained social support provides people with specific resources they need to cope with stressful life events.

There is research to suggest that one possible intervention that builds social support and decreases social isolation is "peer support." Dennis (2003) defines peer support as follows:

Peer support, within the health care context, is the provision of emotional, appraisal, and informational assistance by a created social network member who possesses experiential knowledge of a specific behaviour or stressor and similar characteristics as the target population to address a health-related issue. (p. 329)

In other words, peer support is found amongst people who have similar lived experiences. Dennis (2003) further explains that emotional assistance is given through listening, caring, encouraging, reassuring, and generally avoiding criticism or judgement. Helping to keep the person motivated to endure and solve problems as well as affirming the appropriateness of feelings, experiences, and behaviours, is referred to as appraisal assistance. Informational assistance is provided through sharing relevant knowledge and resources. Dennis suggests that mother-to-mother peer support, involving these three forms of assistance, is effective in reducing isolation amongst mothers.

Health care providers report that while they understand social support in general and peer support in particular to be major factors in the health of new mothers, they do not know how to facilitate that support for the women in their care (Leahy-Warren et al., 2011; Sword et al., 2008). Leisure researchers, however, are clear on the source of such support. Whether the resources entail emotional or esteem support or tangible aid and information support, they are made available through social relationships, particularly friendships, developed in leisure-oriented social networks (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000).

The Sphere of Sociability: The Importance of Leisure-Oriented Social Contexts

Kleiber, Hutchinson, and Williams (2002) wrote, "Leisure, in its compassionate and friendship forms, and through social activities, clearly has the potential to provide people with feelings of social support and a decreased sense of loneliness and isolation" (p.222). According to Glover and Parry (2008), a leisure-oriented social context is a "sphere of sociability" in which friendships and social support (including peer-to-peer support) are formed, maintained, and therefore, sustained (p. 221). They argued the social nature of leisure venues fosters quasi-public sphere effects, thereby providing a social infrastructure that can facilitate social attachments and the development of social capital. Leisure spaces do so because they are casual, unpretentious, and engaging, and therefore buttress an effective socialization process. As Rojek (1999) pointed out, "the culture [of leisure] encourages people to be relaxed, to speak their minds, and be themselves" (p. 87).

Such a culture leads to development of the emotional and empathetic support so important to social and peer support. For instance, Green (1998) noted informal social gatherings are important contexts in which women review their lives and use humor to undermine sexist imagery. In doing so, women's social networks offer support inasmuch as they are contexts in which women feel empowered and resist stereotypical gender roles and expectations. Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) include leisure friendships as a coping strategy for stressful life events. In their words, "friendships developed through leisure may help people cope with stress in different ways, depending on individuals' varied needs in managing particular types of stressful events" (p. 169). Similarly, several illustrations of this emotional and empathetic support were found by Glover and Parry (2008) in their study on the linkages between women's experiences with infertility, health, and the development of social support. For example, research participants noted how their friends were available to them to talk through their infertility problems, encourage them between treatments, and offer a shoulder to cry on when treatments failed. Friendships were credited with helping research participants see themselves through the often trying experiences of infertility and come to closure with the outcomes. In one case, even just knowing she had access to support made one research participant less dependent on the support available.

Gender differences in the development of social and peer support also warrant attention. While both men and women report health benefits associated with the social support that comes from friendships and other social relationships (Taylor, Dickerson, & Klein, 2002), there is evidence that men and women access social support differently (Iwasaki, MacKay, & Mctavish, 2005). For example, Klein and Corwin (2002) found women and men react differently with respect to their response to stress. Their research demonstrated men adopt a "flight or fight" response to stress, whereas women respond with a behavioral pattern more akin to a process they called "tend and befriend." The "tend and befriend" response involved the use of friendships from which women gained physical and psychological social support. They wrote, "tending and befriending promotes safety and diminishes distress by creating and maintaining social networks" (p. 444). Similarly, Jordon and Revenson (1999) concluded, "in times of need women are more likely to mobilize their supports and cope through emotional expressions to these supports" (p. 346). Within a leisure context, Green (1998) also noted that "long-term friendships with other women in groups or as individuals can provide stability and a linking thread through personal and situational change" (p. 182). All told, research demonstrates the importance of leisure-oriented social networks in the development of social and peer support, yet it has focused on face-to-face support (Green, 1998; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Glover and Parry, 2008). Research outside the field demonstrates that online support is an ever increasing important source of social and peer support, especially for mothers. We turn to this literature next.

Accessing Support Online: Motherhood and Social Networking

Whereas in the past many women (especially urban and middle/upper class) would walk across their front yard to access their support networks, today's mother is just as likely to go to her computer and logon to social networking sites (SNS). SNS are online platforms or services focused on building relations amongst people

who often share similar identities, backgrounds, interests, leisure pursuits, etc. (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). According to Drentea and Moren-Cross (2005), the Internet enables “geographically heterogeneous women, who have no prior acquaintance, to connect and create a community of caring and information-sharing” (p. 921). In her recent research exploring the culture of motherhood, Nelson (2009) found virtual communities were an important source of knowledge, advice, and resources for some mothers. Similarly, O’Connor and Madge (2004) found new mothers viewed the Internet as an important source of advice and support. Ley (2007) conducted an ethnography of an online pregnancy and mothering support group that illuminated how social and technical life “mutually construct one another in online support environments” (p. 1). These studies demonstrate that SNS are a growing and important source of support for mothers.

Part of the appeal is that online environments provide users with an alternative way to connect with others who share their interests or identities, such as motherhood (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Horrigan, 2002; Parks & Floyd, 1996). Indeed, Boase et al. (2006), report that online users are more likely to have a larger network of *close* ties than non-Internet users. That is, those who utilize SNS are likely to have a larger network of close relationships at their disposal. With this in mind, research focused on groups whose members share a common social identity (e.g., motherhood) offers an important context in which to examine the roles of online forms of social and peer support. With respect to mothers, in particular, the few studies that have focused on online social networks, focus on Internet technologies, such as online bulletin boards (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005) and chat groups (Ley, 2007), that have since advanced remarkably. Innovations in online social networking sites, including technologies such as photo sharing, user uploaded videos, and user-driven network development, suggest online forms of social and peer support hold even more promise when it comes to developing peer support.

Taken together, this literature demonstrates that social and peer support may be vital to women’s experiences of motherhood. Leisure-oriented social networks are important sources of the development and maintenance of such supports, yet mothers are increasingly interested in connecting with others online (not just face-to-face). The leisure literature has yet to explore the roles of SNS in regard to the development and maintenance of social/peer support, despite the demonstrated importance of such activities for particular groups, such as mothers with young children. With these gaps in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore the roles of SNS in the development of social and peer support amongst mothers with a particular interest in the impact of leisure on social isolation. To achieve this purpose, we embarked on a research project with Momstown.ca (described below), an SNS that aims to bring mothers together both on and offline.

Methods

Momstown.ca is an online service that creates a virtual community for mothers with the intention of bringing them together face-to-face in their local communities. An entrepreneurial endeavour spearheaded in 2007 by three Southern Ontarian mothers hoping to form mothers’ groups in their community, Mom-

stown.ca quickly gathered steam, with 19 chapters now open across Canada. In 2011, Momstown was recognised for its “track record of success, innovation of business idea, and impact on community” with “The Media Mom Entrepreneur of the Year Award” from SavvyMom (SavvyMom.ca). Momstown’s mandate is to facilitate connections between women living in the same community “for support, conversation, or fun.” For a membership fee of \$45 per year, moms and their families can access an online calendar that schedules roughly 20 events each month in the local community. The cost of the membership was repeatedly reported as “very fair” and “worth every penny” from the participants. These events include activities for children of varying ages (e.g., newborn groups, toddler groups, school-aged children’s groups), family events and “moms only” events. Its 24-hour message board (“perfect for those sleepless nights”) allows women to meet online, connect, chat, ask advice, and if necessary, vent. In exchange, the SNS includes ads targeted toward moms, including mom-related product reviews, sponsored “e-blast” email messages and blogs. Though the connection is formed in cyberspace, the goal of Momstown is to connect mothers so they “get off the computer and out of the house.” Momstown is, as founder Ann-Marie Burton explained in conversation with us, “For Moms who believe in community.”

Recruitment and Data Collection

For this project, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants based on “their relevance to the research question, analytical framework, and explanation or account being developed in the research” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 232, see also Patton, 2002). Recruitment techniques included an email advertisement mailed to each member of one Southern Ontarian Momstown chapter through an “e-blast,” an invitational “post” on the Momstown.ca message board (9 participants), and a brief talk given at an organized Momstown event (9 participants). We also used snowball sampling to recruit participants (Patton, 2002); at the end of each interview, participants were asked to suggest other members of Momstown who might be willing to participate in this study, which yielded four participants. Through these methods, we recruited 22 members of Momstown for our study.

Feminism provided the guiding epistemological framework for this study. The feminist epistemology we embraced placed emphasis on emotions, values, personal beliefs, empathy, multiple realities and voices, personal and lived experiences (Denzin, 1997). We recognized women’s lived experiences as the main source of knowledge and mothers as the experts of their own experiences (Nelson, 2009). Consistent with this feminist epistemology, the study was based on active interviews, which Dupuis (1999) described as

much more conversational in style and capitalizes on the dynamic interplay between the researcher and respondents. In active interviews the interview guide is just that, a guide. ...Most importantly, active interviews involve mutual disclosure, a sharing of information and insight in the meaning-making process. (p. 57)

Thus, the active interview created a space where the women could share their own narratives and explain their own experiences. These interviews took place wherever the participant felt was most comfortable and convenient, which in all

cases meant the participant's home. On average, the interviews lasted an hour. Participants were offered reimbursement for childcare costs accrued as a result of the interview, though no participants took us up on this offer. Children were at home during every interview conducted; often this meant participants were tending to children while being interviewed, but just as often children were napping, playing quietly, or being watched elsewhere in the home by a spouse or nanny. We started each interview by asking participants about their history and present involvement with Momstown (e.g., What brought you to Momstown in the first place? How are you presently involved with Momstown?). We then discussed their experiences relating to neighbourhoods and communities (e.g., What is your neighbourhood like? Have you ever found it difficult to meet other moms?). These questions were followed by inquiries into their experiences as mothers (e.g., Can you describe your transition to motherhood? What did your support system look like at the time?), which led us to questions about the impact of Momstown on their experiences of motherhood (e.g. What changes did you see in your life, if any, after joining Momstown? How important have these other mothers been to your experience as a mother?). We then asked about the pros and cons of being a Momstown member (e.g., Would you say that being involved in Momstown has benefited you? If so, how? Would you say that being involved in Momstown has been negative in any way?) and the levels of inclusiveness at Momstown (e.g., Do you think there are any barriers to getting involved in Momstown? Would you describe Momstown as inclusive?). Next, we asked about the importance of connecting online versus the importance of connecting face-to-face (e.g., How important are these two aspects to you: being able to connect through the computer and being able to get out of the house? Is one more important than the other? How do they complement each other?). Finally, we asked about their overall experience of Momstown and whether or not the service lives up to its own directive (e.g. Momstown.ca describes this service as existing to provide moms with "support, conversation and just plain fun." Has this been your experience with Momstown?). At the end of the interview, each participant was given a gift bag (approximate value \$25.00) as a small token of our large appreciation for her time. In addition, each participant was sent a follow-up thank you note for her contributions to the research. All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed professionally with each participant assigned a pseudonym. The quality of data was monitored through periodic checking of interview files with the accompanying transcriptions.

Data analysis

To analyze the data all three researchers (Diana, Caitlin, and Troy) met upon completion of the interviews. It was decided that Diana would take the lead on the initial sorting of the data, which involved reading each transcript a number of times to create initial broad themes (i.e., early experiences of motherhood). Once all the data was sorted in this very broad manner, it was sent out to both Caitlin and Troy for review and comment. Shortly thereafter, the research team met and discussed these initial grouping of data. Comparing and contrasting the large groupings we collectively identified five main thematic areas that encompassed the initial groups. Each of us took one or two of the five main areas and individually analyzed the data.

For this paper, Diana utilized Charmaz's (2008) constant comparison approach in which open coding within and between of interview transcripts resulted in the identification recurrent conceptual themes. Each interview transcript was first analyzed using open categories to develop initial descriptive categories (e.g., "someone who understands"). Focused or selective coding was then used to compare categories both within and between interviews, and to look for emerging conceptual themes, (e.g., "Friendship"). Subsequently, patterns of relationships among themes were also examined (such as the relationship between "Friendship" and "Courtship"). These patterns of relationships were developed into the major themes for this article (for instance "Matchmaker" and "Momance"). Although individual transcripts were analyzed through the development of themes, the group of transcripts were also analyzed as a whole to compare and contrast developing patterns of relationships among the participants' comments and experiences. In this regard, the themes were inclusive of data across the interviews.

Our procedures for collecting, analyzing, and storing data were approved by the appropriate institutional review board. More specifically, to ensure confidentiality, we received written consent from each participant to digitally record the interviews and to use anonymous quotations in any article or report stemming from the interview. In addition, each participant was informed a transcription service would be hired to transcribe the interview; no participant objected to this process. To keep the data confidential, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and all other identifying information (including names of partners, children, friends, family members and so forth) was changed in any written document. Lastly, the data and field notes were stocked in a locked cabinet in an office, which again was approved by each participant in the study.

Profile of the Participants

Twenty-two women participated in the study. The participants ranged in age from twenty-six to forty years old. All but one of the participants were married. One was separated. None of the participants self-identified as either gay or lesbian. Five of the women were on parental leaves, while eight worked full time, and another eight worked part time. One was a stay-at-home mother. All participants had between one and three children with ages ranging from seven months to six years. The majority of respondents identified as White Canadians; however, two participants were immigrants to Canada, two identified as Hispanic, and one as Southeast Asian. All participants had at least some college education, with the majority holding university degrees and one holding a master's degree. The household incomes of participants ranged from \$20,000 to over \$100,000 a year and represented lower, middle, and upper classes according to our analysis. Most of the participants had been members of Momstown for at least a year, while only one mother was a relatively new member. While our participants reflected some diversity, overall the group represents a white, middle class culture, which is a limitation of the study we return to in the conclusion of the manuscript.

Findings

The analysis of the data revealed three main themes. First, almost all of the women at times felt overwhelmed and isolated as new mothers. Second, they desperately wanted to make “mommy friends” with whom they shared similar experiences of motherhood (children the same age), but also had leisure interests in common. In their attempts to befriend other mothers, lots of participants found themselves out “stroller stalking” in search of “mommy dates,” which was not terribly effective. Third, Momstown.ca effectively served as a matchmaker for moms and many women developed deep, platonic relationships with other moms, which we refer to as momances. We explore each of these three themes below.

Isolated and Lonely

As expected, many of the women discussed feelings of social isolation in their early experiences of motherhood. For example, Julia described her early days of motherhood as

Desperately lonely, desperately lonely. I bought a car because, after the move out of the city, all of a sudden I'm in the suburbs, and oh my gosh, you can't walk anywhere. I'm so stuck, and I had met a lot of neighbourhood moms in my previous neighbourhood when everyone was on maternity leave. After the baby turns 12 months, most of the moms go back to work, and so I was standing around going oh my god there's nobody here, no one, there's no peer support and it's just hard. It's a very long day; it's a very long day.

Julia craved peer interaction, but the lack of sociability and at-home mothers in her new neighbourhood left her with insufficient peer support, desperately lonely, and isolated. Placed in a similar scenario, Clara commented: “So here I am in this new city, and I knew nobody. I was pregnant with another baby, and I just felt really alone.” This sense of isolation was exacerbated, in some cases, by sleep deprivation that often accompanies motherhood. Samantha, for example, experienced severe sleep deprivation with the arrival of her son, which contributed to her loneliness. She said:

Everyone warns, you know, they tell you being a mother is challenging, and it can be isolating, but you can know and be told these things, but until you're actually going through them, you don't understand how bad it can get, how isolated you can be, how overwhelming. When they say sleep deprived, yeah, yeah, I've been sleep deprived. No, you have never experienced sleep deprivation like this. You are a completely different person 'cause you are so sleep deprived it affects your personality. And, you don't understand the extreme that that is. So, you can say, “Oh, I'm prepared to be a mom,” you know, “I'm great with kids,” “I babysat a child or watched someone else's child for an entire month,” and it's still completely different. It's a huge massive transition, and I don't think anyone's really expecting it.

The lack of emotional preparedness for the transition to motherhood was further intensified by the lack of empathetic responses participants got from their family and friendship network. For example, Mindy stated, "I didn't have any friends who were at the same stage in life as me. They're all still single and partying and not ready to have kids." Others found they were the first in their group of friends to have children, and thus, found themselves without "mommy friends" who could relate and empathize with their transition to motherhood.

For some participants, a sense of isolation was not only linked to a lack of peer support, but also family support as their relationships with family changed after the arrival of children. Isobel commented, "I found that, when I had kids, my relationship with my in-laws went kind of [in the] trash. When I had the baby, all of a sudden they were giving us advice and expecting us to follow it, and when we didn't, it was a big thing." Other women did not gain the support they needed from their spouses, which exacerbated their sense of isolation. Frances explained, "My husband never understood the psychology of it. He just thought, you are at home, you don't have to work, what are you worried about? That was his point of view."

Mental health challenges, such as postpartum depression, were significantly linked to isolation for some participants. For example, Tamarra "loved being a mom," but discovered it was not an easy job "being trapped at home with no other adults." In describing her mental state, she explained, "I never ever had anger towards her or resentment or any ill feeling towards my daughter. It was all on me. I'm bad, I'm insufficient and blah, blah, blah. I saw around me all these super moms and was overwhelmed." Social situations in which she compared herself to other new moms who seemed to handle the transition to motherhood seamlessly made the symptoms of her formally diagnosed postpartum depression worse. Thus, Tamarra avoided certain social scenarios, but consequently felt isolated and alone.

Patricia narrowed her sense of isolation down to the Canadian winter. She explained: "I think here in Canada it's hard cause of the winter. That we kind of stay inside and we don't socialize. We have about four months where getting out is difficult. What I find isolating here is that I go for a walk and I don't see anyone. I don't know anybody during the winter." Other women could not identify the source of isolation, but acknowledged their feelings of seclusion. Olivia explained, "I can't really pinpoint why I felt that way or why I felt overwhelmed and isolated. I just did."

Desperately Seeking "Mommy Friends" and Pursuing "Mommy Dates"

What is important to underscore here is that the women experienced a sense of isolation despite a strong desire to connect with other mothers. Indeed, all of the women in the study communicated their desire to bond with other mothers. For example, Tanya said:

I wanted to hear from somebody that's gone through it, I wanted somebody to be here with me that had gone through it and can tell me this is fine. And that's hard to find when you're in the middle of it. I wanted to feel like, well, okay, I'm not alone. It's hard, but it has to be done and I can do this, and other people do it. And we're just going to get through.

Many participants spoke specifically to the desire to connect with other mothers who had children the same age. As Julia stated: “You could have a fabulous husband and a fabulous mother and lots of friends, but if you have a two-month-old, you need to find someone else with a two-month-old to connect with.” Forging friendships with others in the same situation was a common theme expressed by participants. Even so, participants found making friends as adults particularly challenging. For example, Molly said, “I can’t just go up to somebody and say ‘Hi, I’m Molly. Want to be my friend?’” Anna described her feelings of awkwardness when trying to make new friends as an adult:

I like to talk a lot and I’m friendly, but it’s hard to make new friends. I think as adults, it is weird making new friends. Kids seem to meet people and they’re friends. But as an adult, it’s weird. And you never want to be that person that people think is weird. I never know if people think I’m weird if I’m pursuing a friendship. It’s awkward.

A number of women highlighted that making friends as a new mother was especially difficult because it was challenging to carry on a meaningful conversation while dealing with sleep deprivation and/or being distracted by caring for a new baby and possibly multiple children.

Despite the challenges, many women did attempt to connect with other moms. Some were so desperate they revealed attempts to make friends with “any mom with a baby in a stroller,” which resulted in feelings of what Julia described as a “stroller stalker.” For example, she stated:

I was out walking and I saw a woman who was pregnant and had a child around the same age as mine. I literally crossed a busy road to go talk to her. And I’d never met her in my life! I was like, “How old is your child?” Totally desperate. I’m not shy, but probably someone who watched would have thought I was nuts!

Not only was “stroller stalking” awkward, it also was mostly unproductive. The women had no way to identify if the person they approached was someone with whom they had anything in common besides motherhood. As a result, the women found themselves on what they described as “bad mommy dates.” Anna explained:

I’d see other parents with their kids, but it’s hard to go up and say, ‘Hey, how’s it going?’ You have no idea if you’re going to have anything in common with this woman or even if she’s going to want to talk to you. Because you want to have similar interests, but not exactly the same. You want kids around the same age because otherwise play dates just don’t work. There’s a lot of criteria: you don’t know how they think, how they act, so you could end up getting into a friendship with somebody you don’t really like and then they’re calling you all the time and they want to go out and you have to break up with them. It’s a lot of other variables just outside of, I’m a mom, this is my child, let’s play together. You want to avoid a bad mommy date.

The dating analogy was mentioned by a number of participants, who were in their words, seeking out “mommy friends.” For example, Julia stated, “Trying to find moms is a little bit like dating, right? You’ve got to kind of find somebody, and then you have to actually figure out if they like you as much as you like them. And then is it okay to ask to meet for a coffee, or is that too forward?” Similarly, in discussing her attempts to make friends after the arrival of her son, Mindy commented, “I really feel like it’s dating, like we’re in high school and trying to meet a new guy.”

Matchmaking and “Momancing”

Similar to an online dating site, our analysis demonstrated that Momstown.ca served as a matchmaker by enabling the women to court other moms online and face-to-face. More specifically, the online profiles of Momstown.ca members that include names, pictures, interests/hobbies of both mom and her children enabled the women to identify other moms with whom they shared similar leisure interests/hobbies. For example, Anna stated, “You can go online, find the people you click with, and then meet them in real life.” Mindy appreciated how the online profiles took the creepy factor out of trying to meet other moms. In her words, “I don’t feel like I’m the creepy stalker, cause I can sit and stalk the message board and that’s normal, that’s what you’re supposed to do in Momstown.”

Once familiar with the Momstown.ca members through the online profiles, the participants found their face-to-face interactions were comfortable and there was a previously established sense of familiarity. For example, Isobel stated:

The online forum means I can meet the moms before I meet them in person. So when I go and meet them in person, we even have pictures, so I kind have an idea of who this person is, so I’m not meeting a complete stranger. It’s much more comfortable when I’m going out and doing activities with these moms. I’m not walking into a strange crowd of people, I’m actually walking into other moms and I know that they’re going through similar things like me, because we already talked about it.

Tamarra also appreciated the way the online profiles facilitated her face-to-face interactions with the other moms. The online profiles gave her confidence to approach other members with whom she shared similar interests because she knew all the moms were looking to connect, which removed the awkwardness of making friends. She explained:

I don’t want to go up to somebody and say, ‘Hey, you have a kid around my kid’s age. Can I have your phone number?’ It’s really awkward. Having Momstown or social networking sites all those people are there and they’re there for the same purpose. They want to meet other moms, too, so there’s not that awkwardness. It’s easy to say, ‘Hey, do you want to get together sometime?’ It’s like online dating.

Serving as matchmaker, Momstown.ca effectively removed the awkwardness that mothers experienced by enabling the women to get to know each other online and face-to-face. Essentially, Momstown.ca was a sphere of sociability in which women were “guaranteed to find other moms” with the explicit knowledge that

all the moms were looking for others with whom to connect. The importance of such connections was underscored by Anna, who said:

Momstown is a place where I'm guaranteed to find moms. And I need moms because I'm a mom, and that's a huge part of my life; it's a very significant part of my life. Yes, I'm an engineer, I'm a wife, but right now, most of my life is being a mom. I need to be surrounded by moms to continue learning and to be inspired and to find common ground.

The face-to-face events combined with the online profiles and forums facilitated by Momstown.ca enabled the women to meet in safe, comfortable, child-friendly environments, which resulted in the development of many close friendships or what we refer to as momances. We selected the term momance as a play on the popular word "bromance," which is utilized to reflect the type of relationship that develops between men who spend a lot of time together and develop deep friendship that are emotionally expressive and open, but not romantic. Given the popularity of the word "bromance," we hope that our use of "momance" will also be understood to reflect such friendships, but amongst mothers. To be clear, momances are close, emotionally expressive, open friendships that develop between mothers who spend a lot of time together (online and face-to-face), but are not romantic. For example, Rita stated, "Ella and I are pretty close. There's been a couple times I've emailed her or messaged her, I'm like, okay I'm having this problem and, right away she's there to help me. It's like having the old school type neighbourhood at your fingertips." Similarly, Olivia said, "I found everyone welcoming. I've made close friends and talk with them outside of Momstown too." Anna revealed her experience in the following manner: "They had their little inner circle of friends and stuff, and they just completely welcomed me into it." Petra highlighted how the many opportunities to get together with other moms at Momstown.ca (online and face-to-face) enabled the women to really know each other: "we're not just talking online. We're meeting each other and we're seeing each other all the time. We're also talking about stuff when we can't get out of the house. So we *know* each other" (original emphasis). The level of knowledge about one another meant the women could move beyond surface level friendships to deeper and more trusting relationships. For some women, like Nancy, the opportunity to develop such relationships was rare. She explained, "I feel welcome when I'm there, and I feel like an oddball in normal life. So to feel welcome even though I feel like an odd person anyway is nice."

There was plenty of evidence of such deep, platonic relationships in the women's stories of how they helped one another through tough times. For example, Ava was injured and discussed how the women with whom she was close came to visit her. At times, they simply sat and chatted with her as she was unable to move. Ava deeply valued these interactions and appreciated her friends' time, which is hard to come by amongst women raising young children. Miranda discussed how the women helped one another through major health issues (such as breast cancer), but also in smaller, ongoing ways such as last minute childcare. She stated:

We've had some moms that have gone through some really big difficult things. Like one of the moms had breast cancer and we did a fund rais-

er thing, a couple of fund raiser things within Momstown with regard to breast cancer. There's that connection [amongst the moms] and that community support within as well. If moms need daycare or something comes up, someone says, 'Oh, I'm available.' So it's like the community that you had where you were growing up or what you would get out of them, but you're getting it out of this group of moms.

Miranda's quote reflects the larger sense of community that was evident amongst the women. Several participants commented that the relationships they developed through Momstown.ca reminded them of the "old-school community" they experienced while growing up. Indeed, for many, Momstown.ca became their main community and even had a sense of family that reflected the close relationships the women developed. For example, Moira commented,

The way that our society's changing so much, you don't even know your neighbours nowadays. Half the time you don't even know your neighbours. You wouldn't go to your neighbours and ask for a cup of sugar now. But I could totally call up one of my moms and they'd drive over with a cup of sugar for me.

The strong sense of community that took on a family-like quality was reflected in the following quote by Isobel: "Instead of being with family or the community that I grew up with, this new group of moms that I'm a part of, this is my community."

Many participants discussed the value of the face-to-face interactions in fostering deep platonic relationships and a strong sense of community. Beth explained:

I think meeting face-to-face is really beneficial. I joined other forums in the past, but it's not the same. I mean, you can sit in front of a computer all day long, but you don't feel like you really know those people a lot of the times. So when you're getting out meeting them face-to-face you feel like you're forming actual friendships as opposed just talking at somebody online.

Anita echoed Beth's sentiments about the contribution of getting out of the house and connecting face-to-face with other moms for her mental health:

The social and emotional aspect of getting out of the house and talking to someone else and interacting and knowing that someone else knows what you're going through, they understand. I get sanity out of it.

The face-to-face interactions were important for all participants, but some clearly highlighted the importance of the online component to the connections they developed with other moms. Isobel stated:

When I found out about the online community and the chat blogs and you know, all that kind of stuff, it was just like oh, this is perfect. So I'm up in the middle of the night cause my child won't go to sleep. I have some other moms that I can talk to, who are also stuck in the middle of the night, up, who can't sleep, you know. We can't go out and meet at 2 a.m. but we can talk online and, you know, rant about children not

sleeping and the houses being a mess and not having time to shower or anything.

Isobel formed deep bonds with other moms also up at 2 a.m. and connecting online through Momstown.ca, which decreased her sense of isolation, especially in that moment. Similarly, Julia valued the opportunity to connect with other moms through the online component of Momstown.ca when she couldn't get out of the house and was feeling isolated:

I think the other piece is feeling isolated when you're at home and you can't get out. Well you can still get out. Like on snow days you should see the message board, it goes crazy because moms can still get out. You know like it's nap time, okay well, I still need an outlet and I can't leave my house right now, but I can interact with you guys. I'm feeling less isolated even if I'm still in my house all by myself. That's the virtual thing.

The online forum facilitated deeper bonds amongst some participants than the face-to-face interactions as the women were able to finish a thought and write a full sentence. Jackie explained:

When you get together you don't have the opportunity to always finish a conversation, like that's so common. That's what is nice about the online piece. So you start a conversation and now I can finish it. Oh my god, now I can actually talk to the moms versus us all just chasing people up and down slides and we actually have the opportunity to bond.

All told, however, the general sentiment was that the online and face-to-face interactions complemented one another and enabled the women to court each other, develop deep platonic relationships, which then reduced their sense of isolation. If one of these aspects was missing, Momstown.ca would not "be the same." Anna explained:

It was nice because it had both sides. It has in-person activities and then also has online for when you are stuck at home and can't leave, 'cause there's a snowstorm or the child's sick or whatever. I think if we ever took away the forum for example, I think Momstown would not be the same.

Clearly, SNS, such as Momstown.ca, play a vital role in getting women together. Both on and offline interactions are vital to developing a peer support network for new mothers. In turn, this network of friends plays a significant role in terms of reducing a sense of isolation that many mothers experience.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the roles of social networking sites in the development of social and peer support for mothers of young children. In particular, we focused on the impact of social networking sites on mothers' sense of isolation. Our research demonstrated that women experience a sense of isolation for a variety of reasons and desperately want to connect with other mothers in a similar situation. However, women report difficulty making friends as an adult, especially after they become mothers. Indeed, women reported attempts to befriend other

mothers through “stroller stalking,” which often led to bad “mommy dates.” Social networking sites like Momstown.ca that focus on connecting mothers, effectively serve as a matchmaker for moms by enabling women to court other moms online and face-to-face. These interactions facilitate what we playfully refer to as momances or deep platonic relationships amongst mothers, but also a sense of community that is akin to family relationships. Resultantly, women experienced care, camaraderie, and felt connected, not isolated and alone.

Clearly, mothers crave friendships and the support they provide. A shared identity, such as motherhood, however, is insufficient unto itself in terms of building friendships; it will get you in the door, in other words, but that door is simply an entry point. A relationship or friendship requires more common interests, an investment of time, and effort. For the mothers in this study, online and off-line interactions were complementary in terms of building those friendships. We turn next to a discussion of these findings, beginning with the mothers’ desire for friendships.

The Desire for Momances and the Need for Matchmaking

Our results speak to the relevance of the homophilious principle in leisure settings wherein people want to connect with others in similar life situations (Glover & Parry, 2008, 2009). Previous research has found peer support based upon a shared social identity, such as motherhood (Mulcahy, Parry & Glover, 2010), infertility (Glover & Parry, 2008), and cancer (Parry & Glover, 2011), is forged within leisure-oriented social contexts (Glover & Parry, 2008). Hutchison et al.’s (2008) research with the Red Hat Society demonstrates the value of adult women gathering around their love of play and silliness. The friendship developed through the Red Hat Society served as a coping resource for the women throughout the lived experience of aging. Similarly, Green (1998) demonstrated the importance of female friendships in women’s resistance of sexist and gendered ideologies. Specifically related to motherhood, Mulcahy, Parry, and Glover (2010) explored playgroups (also called mother’s groups, mothers and tots, baby and me, etc.) that bring mothers together who have young children and are seeking peer support. Indeed, there is a growing body of leisure scholarship exploring the contribution of bringing women together around a shared social identity.

Not surprisingly, mothers in the current research wanted to connect with other women with young children. What was surprising, however, was the difficulty the mothers reported in their attempts to make friends. This aspect of motherhood has largely been neglected in the motherhood literature (Nelson, 2009). One notable exception is an article by Mulcahy and Parry (2011) in which the authors explored the gradual and abrupt transitions that accompany first time motherhood. The authors specifically highlight the challenges associated with meeting other moms, especially for women who are more introverted and/or cannot access specific mother groups (e.g., La Leche League). In the current research, the challenge of accessing other moms manifested in “stroller stalking” in which the women desperately sought out other mothers who appeared to have children of a similar age. Unfortunately, these attempts at making “mommy friends” often lead to ‘bad mommy dates’ as the women had nothing but motherhood in common. This finding demonstrates a shared social identity (in this case motherhood) is

insufficient on its own to develop a friendship. While it may gain a woman access to other moms, shared leisure interests are necessary for a deep platonic friendship to form.

In the current research, women were able to gain knowledge of those shared interests through an SNS. SNS, such as Momstown.ca, play a key role effectively serving as a “matchmaker for moms” by providing access to online user profiles that enable women to court other moms before meeting face-to-face. Such actions facilitated the development of momances that provide the women with the peer support they clearly desire. This finding builds upon Glover and Parry’s (2008) model of the social process of friendship and its implications for health and well-being by adding a circle within the sphere of sociability that recognizes the importance of shared leisure interests for the development of friendships, or in this case, momances.

The benefits of deep, platonic relationships are clear as the women tapped into the three different forms of assistance that Dennis (2003) deemed essential in reducing social isolation amongst mothers. For example, the mothers in this study gained emotional assistance through listening, caring, encouraging, reassuring, and generally avoiding criticism or judgement of one another. These outcomes seemed to happen in both on and offline contexts, which is a point we return to later in this paper. The women were also the recipients of appraisal assistance insofar as they helped keep one another motivated to endure and solve problems as well as affirming the appropriateness of feelings, experiences, and behaviours. This finding supports previous research that has demonstrated the development of social capital amongst women and positive impact on health (Glover & Parry, 2008). Lastly, there was evidence the women provided informational assistance by sharing relevant knowledge and resources. According to Dennis (2003), the type of mother-to-mother peer support the women gained through Momstown.ca is the most effective way to reduce isolation amongst mothers. Moreover, this finding is in keeping with the notion that women “tend and befriend” during stressful life events (Klein & Corwin, 2002).

Klein and Corwin (2002) found that women gain physical and psychological social support from their friendships during stressful life events by “tending and befriending.” The current research, demonstrated that for many mothers, the transition to motherhood can be overwhelming and indeed stressful, which other scholars have also noted (see e.g., Nelson, 2009; Mulcahy & Parry, 2011). Similar to the “tending and befriending” found by Klein and Corwin (2002), joining the SNS Momstown allowed the participants in the current research to build a social network (both on and offline) that provided them with care, camaraderie, and community, resulting in better support, more fun, and improved mental health. Indeed, the peer support developed through Momstown enabled the participants to not only survive, but *thrive* throughout motherhood. This finding speaks to the desire expressed by women, health care professionals, and researchers alike, for an alternative, non-pharmacological or therapy-related postpartum intervention that addresses the need for social support while speaking to concerns raised about existing peer support interventions for new mothers (Dennis, 2003).

The Complementary Nature of On and Offline Interactions

The peer support developed through Momstown.ca was facilitated by online profiles that resemble those on online dating sites insofar as they include pictures and reveal demographic information, attitudes, and values (Fiore & Donath, 2004). Such profiles, both on online dating sites and Momstown.ca, provide a portal for what Heino et al. (2010, p. 443) referred to as “relation-shopping” (looking for a “perfect mate”). The online dating literature critiques “relation-shopping” for its emphasis on the process of *finding* the perfect mate, which implies a relationship can be formed with little investment in time, emotional connection, or communication (Heino et al, 2010). Heino et al (2010) explained:

Online dating sites present a portal or market for people to meet, but for the most part leave the rest of the relationship development to be worked out in subsequent (face-to-face) communication. This can privilege certain qualities over others and perhaps encourage a naïve sense that finding the right match will result in a successful relationship with little effort. (p. 443)

While Momstown.ca did provide a portal for “friend-shopping,” as we prefer to describe it because of the participants’ aim to find new friends, their simultaneous focus on face-to-face interactions also facilitated what Duck (1991) referred to as “relation-shiping” and what we henceforth will refer to as friend-shiping or building a successful friendship through communicative interaction. Unlike online dating sites, Momstown.ca did not help facilitate a match between moms and leave the resultant friendship to develop unassisted. By contrast, users accessed the online profiles to provide details about Momstown members, create a sense of familiarity, and increase the comfort levels at the face-to-face interactions, which were also organized through Momstown.ca. There was a demonstrated appreciation by Momstown.ca for the type of communicative interaction (online and face-to-face) that is credited in the development of successful friendships (Duck, 1991). In other words, Momstown.ca recognized friendships are not only “found,” but also need to be built. In this sense, online dating sites have something to learn from the Momstown.ca model.

These findings build upon Glover and Parry’s (2008) model of the social process of friendship and its implications for health and well-being. That is, it appears individuals with a shared social identity (e.g., motherhood) first engage in the process of identifying potential friends (i.e., friend-shopping) before engaging in the process of building, maintaining, and sustaining friendships (i.e., friend-shiping). These processes happen within what Glover and Parry referred to as the sphere of sociability, “a social infrastructure that facilitates social attachment” (p. 222). In this study, the social infrastructure was an SNS called Momstown, thereby suggesting these processes can take place within on and offline.

Importantly, this study highlights the salience of the complementary nature of online and offline interactions in the development of friendships. This finding is significant given previous research that has privileged face-to-face interactions (Putnam, 2000). More specifically, Putnam (2000) argued social capital could only be developed through face-to-face interactions, yet the current study provides examples of situations where participants gained such emotional support or in-

formation through online interactions. There are plenty of social commentators who claim online interactions are not as important as face-to-face (Putnam, 2000). However, the current research shows *both* are important. To this end, Beer (2008) argued no distinction should be made between online and offline in our increasingly technologically mediated way of life. Given the ubiquity of technology in our lives, leisure studies ought to concentrate more on the roles of mobile, locative, and integrated technologies (Heino, et al., 2010) and their implications for leisure activities. For example, online profiles such as those utilized in online dating sites and Momstown.ca involve “both self-presentation to attract others and assessment of others’ profiles for potential matches” (Heino et al., 2010, p. 430). Marketing and self-promotion are ever-increasing important components of leisure (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1993), which warrants research. Our study demonstrates the importance of these technologies to women’s experiences of motherhood, especially with regard to reducing social isolation, but clearly there are additional contexts in which leisure research could shed light on the link between leisure and technology. Moreover additional research is needed in the area of rapidly expanding technologies including Blackberrys, PDAs, and smart dust, amongst others including their ability to increase people’s quality of life. We hope this study may help to initiate this line of research.

Our findings must be interpreted with the limitations of the study in mind, however. More specifically, both the framework and the participants for this study largely represent a white, middle class experience of motherhood. That is, the ways that the diversity of women’s lives (e.g., rural, first Nation, new immigrant with multi-generational home structures, etc.) might influence experiences of motherhood warrant attention both in the leisure and motherhood literature. Clearly, diverse experiences of motherhood, social isolation, social networking and the implications for community are important areas for future research.

Conclusion

Similar to many aspects of our society, motherhood has been influenced by technology. While it may not appear to be obvious, in many ways technology has demonstrated value to mothers. For example, research demonstrates that women are moving from “mothering without a safety net” to mothering “on the net” with a positive impact upon women’s sense of isolation (Mulcahy, Parry, & Glover, 2012). Technological developments and the impact on mothers (amongst other groups) warrant a leisure lens as it is within leisure contexts that many technological advances are being utilized. As technology continues to evolve it makes sense that leisure research will want to understand the impact on various social groups. In the meantime, it is vital to understand and appreciate the contribution of Momstown.ca (and other SNS networks that bring mothers together face-to-face and online) to the health and well-being of mothers. The health literature has tended to view leisure as trivial, if not completely irrelevant, to health outcomes. Clearly, the current research demonstrates the need to reframe health research so that a broader, more holistic approach to health, including leisure pursuits, is appreciated as also impacting upon women’s health. In short, Momstown.ca demonstrates the role and impact of leisure in women’s health.

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