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‘Mothering’ in a culture of (dis)connectivity: online parenting forums, maternal guilt, and parental competency

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Abstract

Motherhood is a complex period of transition during which many social, physical, and emotional changes take place (McDaniel et al., 2012; Waddell, 2002). During this sensitive period, mothers may experience feelings of maternal guilt and inadequacy, often as a result of perceptions of having failed to live up to socially sanctioned notions of a "good mother" (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Sutherland, 2010). Mothers may also feel incompetent in their roles as parents and unable to meet the demands of raising their children successfully in ways that provide them with a sense of satisfaction and efficacy (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978; Johnston & Mash, 1989). These feelings of maternal guilt and parental incompetence have been shown to have deleterious effects on overall maternal wellbeing (Amaro et al., 2019; Martins & Gaffan, 2000; Waddell, 2002).

Increasingly, mothers are using online parenting platforms as a means to connect with a wider maternal community (Price et al., 2018; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). Online parenting platforms provide opportunities for mothers to share their parenting experiences whilst being encouraged and supported by other mothers and also offer anecdotal information and advice on a variety of childrearing topics (Hall & Irvine, 2008; Madge & O'Connor, 2006). Whilst these online communities can provide mothers with much needed perinatal support and information, they can also be places of judgement and critique, leaving mothers feeling more vulnerable and disconnected from the empathetic support they desire (Verduyn et al., 2015; Verduyn et al., 2017). These adverse online experiences can have deleterious effects on overall maternal wellbeing as well as on both maternal guilt and perceived maternal competence.

A healthy mother-child attachment and optimal childhood development are important outcomes in childrearing and activities that leave mothers feeling increased maternal guilt or incompetence or that protect against these, warrant further investigation. As such, this study investigated the potential relationships between reported levels of maternal guilt, perceived

parental competency, and online parenting platform usage and also explored mothers' subjective experiences of maternal guilt and parental competency in relation to their online interactions.

This study used a convergent, parallel mixed-methods research design to investigate the aforementioned relationships (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The research design for the quantitative aspect of the study was non-experimental, correlational, and cross-sectional. As the qualitative aspect of this study investigated the participants' subjective experiences of their maternal identities while navigating online parenting platforms, a feminist approach was chosen. The sample consisted of 309 participants from a variety of different demographic backgrounds and nationalities, all of whom answered a set of online questionnaires that included a self-developed demographic questionnaire, an adapted online parenting platform use questionnaire, the Parental Sense of Competency Scale, the Parenting Guilt Scale, and three open-ended questions to collect qualitative data.

The analysis revealed that parental guilt correlated significantly, positively, and weakly with increased amounts of time spent on online parenting platforms as well as with the number of online parenting platforms accessed. The results also indicated a significant, positive, and weak correlation between parental guilt and the use of informal online parenting platforms. Parental satisfaction (an aspect of parental competency) was significantly, negatively, and weakly correlated with the amount of time spent on online parenting platforms as well as with the level of engagement on these sites. Parental satisfaction also correlated significantly, positively, and weakly with parental efficacy (another aspect of parental competency). No significant relationships were found between parental efficacy or total parental sense of competency and online parenting platform usage. Themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data suggested that feelings of parental guilt and/or incompetence were more common in situations where the discussion or advice on online parenting platforms was perceived as dictatorial, judgemental, and/or elicited upward social comparison. Reduced guilt and/or enhanced competence were described in cases where downward social comparison, lateral social comparison, and supportive community environments were experienced.

Participants also outlined strategies they used to manage engagement with online sites in a constructive way.

The mixed-methods research design used in this study allowed for a more complex understanding to emerge when investigating the relationships between the main variables in this study. The findings indicated that online parenting platform use can have both positive and negative associations with parental guilt and competency depending upon the way in which these platforms are used. Discernment is therefore needed when engaging with these online communities. The findings from this study also suggested a need for increased training on how to use online parenting platforms safely, including informing users of the potential risks and benefits that online engagement may have for their maternal wellbeing. The findings also contribute to the paucity of literature on the important topic of online parenting platform usage and maternal wellbeing, particularly given the prolific way in which the internet is accessed in the digital age.