Chapter 4
Cyber–Moms Facing Motherhood: Holding Functions and Regressive Movements in Parenting Websites

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ABSTRACT

Mothers and mothers-to-be often become e-health users because of their need for sharing emotional and practical parental experiences. In this sense, web forums seem to positively contribute to parenting skills and transition to motherhood. This study aims at exploring how 379 Italian mothers use two Italian forums, the manifest and latent contents of their interactions, and the emotional connections between their own maternal experiences and the e-group dynamics. The qualitative analysis of 7433 comments pointed out five main themes, describing how mothers make sense of their experiences through the online dimension: the group; I am; personal experience; perspective knowhow; tech-moms. This study confirms that parenting experience represents a big challenge for rising mothers. Moreover, it shows that the e-groups can alternatively reproduce a peer group functioning and a feeding breast, a reassuring container with holding functions, or a “toilet breast”, encouraging progressive as well as regressive movements.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-2351-3.ch004

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Pregnancy and the transition to parenthood represent some of the biggest life challenges, which need support. As Albrecht and Adelman (1984) highlighted, social support allows people to manage the uncertainty related to the stress and improve the sense of personal control or efficacy over their environments. Web communities offer a great opportunity to create online groups and receive necessary and appropriate experiences of social support and comparison. Probably, for this reason, parents and parents-to-be represent a large category of e-health users, as they can express and satisfy online their need for sharing emotional and practical experiences. For example, a recent multicenter Italian cross-sectional study (Bert et al., 2013) revealed that around 20% of pregnant women use online forums to share information and to experience support from other pregnant women. It has been demonstrated that pregnant women frequently use the internet to search for pregnancy-related information (Scaioli et al., 2005).

Furthermore, the increasing role of the Internet in everyday life has changed the meaning of what a community is. Indeed, on the Web, parents can create communities based on shared interests (Kirk & Milnes, 2015), setting up groups composed of different individuals who offer different perspectives, experiences, opinions and sources of information (Brady & Guerin, 2010), and, lastly, to receive Internet-based peer support, despite the geographical distance or time constraints (Niela-Vilén et al., 2014). Thus, what the parents and parents-to-be are searching for on the e-communities? How and why they are using them? The reason for participating in e-parents’ groups should be investigated, taking into account the underlying meanings and psychological dynamics which possibly characterize an identity and role transition.

Background

Overall, future parents have to face changes with a number of adaptive and transformative tasks (Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998) to successfully transit from the couple dyad to the family triad (Montigny, Lacharité, & Amyot, 2006), crossing an important adulthood crisis (Cadei & Simeone. 2011). Moreover, they are required to transform their roles and identities, integrating new parental functions (Deave, Johnson, & Ingram, 2008; Slade, Cohen, Sadler, & Miller, 2009; Widarsson, Kerstis, Sundquist, Engström, & Sarkadi, 2012; Spinelli et al., 2016). Particularly, the psychodynamic literature strongly highlighted how much these challenges influence in a specific way the mothers rather than the fathers, due to the cultural stereotype of the “perfect mother”, socially established and internalized by women, thus becoming a kind of phantasy (Chodorow & Contratto, 1989), not present in the
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