We Got You, Mama:

How Facebook Mom Groups support members

experiencing intimate partner violence.

By

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Abstract

With the rise of social media, Facebook Mom Groups have become an important resource for mothers to connect over their shared identity and provide support and information to one another. These female-focused groups have become safe spaces for members to have vulnerable conversations, including sharing past and present experiences of intimate partner violence. Through the analysis of secondary data (existing Facebook posts and comments), this study explores what kind of support members of an international Facebook Mom Group seek out and receive, related to their experiences of intimate partner violence. In total, 71 original posts and 1,200 comments/replies were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The study found that members who posted about intimate partner violence sought out advice, emotional support, social network connections, resources and confirmation of abuse from the group. The findings also revealed that 84.5% (N=60) of the 71 original posters received the type of support they were seeking from the group. Though the remaining 15.5% (N=11) did not receive the type of support they requested, they did receive at least one alternative type of support. The results of this research help to fill a gap in current knowledge, explore the benefits and risks associated with seeking support for intimate partner violence in a Facebook group, and can be used to inform communications strategies for social service agencies.

Chapter 1: Introduction

There I was, the fall of 2017, up in the middle of the night, rocking my sweet screaming newborn baby, desperately hoping she would fall back asleep. It felt like no one else in the world was awake, but thanks to the Facebook Mom Groups I was sleepily scrolling, I knew that wasn't the case. There they were, the other members of the group, exhausted just like me, asking questions and sharing support. Discussions (and sometimes debates) around sleep training, diaper rashes, and setting boundaries with in-laws ensued. And then every once in a while, a different kind of post would come through. Often shared anonymously, these posts would describe a member whose partner had abused them and how they had no one else to talk to and nowhere else to turn. The comments would pour in from other members, sharing stories, resources and offering advice, sometimes judgement. And with the morning light, a new post would rise to the top of the feed and the group would move on. But not me. Those posts stuck with me.

Using the search function on Facebook I was able to find hundreds of closed and private Facebook Mom Groups in the Edmonton, Alberta region alone, including one group with over 19,000 members. Local Facebook Mom Groups in this region are as plentiful as they are active. Through my own experience as an organic member of these groups beginning in 2017, I have observed that posts regarding intimate partner violence have become more frequent in recent years. This anecdotal evidence is supported by research which has demonstrated that the rate of domestic violence and sexual assault increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. "In Alberta alone calls to domestic violence and sexual assault hotlines during the pandemic increased by 57%" (Montesanti et al., 2020, p. 4). With Facebook Mom Groups acting as an important resource for women seeking advice on abusive relationships, more needs to be known about exactly what kind of information and resources are being shared with these members in crisis.

Inspired by those late-night scrolling sessions and the desire to conduct meaningful research, this study explores what happens when a member of a Facebook Mom Group posts

about experiences of intimate partner violence. Though much research exists about Facebook Groups, including Facebook Mom Groups, there is a gap in research focused specifically on group members posting about intimate partner violence. This study aims to address the research gap and inspire future studies by conducting a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of secondary data collected from an international Facebook Mom Group. The literature review will explore interconnected sub-topics that form the foundation of this study, providing a shared understanding of how Facebook Mom Groups have become safe spaces for support. Subsequently, the paper will focus on the collection and analysis of publicly available secondary data (existing Facebook Mom Group posts and comments), allowing for the examination of authentic interactions, without risking the re-traumatization of survivors of intimate partner violence by asking them to share their lived experience.

Positionality Statement

In conducting this research, I recognize the importance of reflecting on my own experiences as an individual and professional. I am a mom of two young girls and have been married to my husband for over a decade. I have not experienced intimate partner violence or family violence in my past or current relationships and therefore do not have lived experience in this area. At the time of writing this paper, I am employed as a communications professional supporting a municipal Family and Community Services department. In my role at Family and Community Services, I develop and implement communications strategies to promote the department's social service-based support, programs and resources.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review lays the foundation for research exploring how Facebook Mom Groups support members experiencing intimate partner violence, by answering the question: How have Facebook Mom Groups become a safe space for members to seek advice on vulnerable topics, like intimate partner violence?

Methodology

After completing preliminary searches for literature through the University of Alberta Library's database, Google Scholar and Elicit, it was apparent that there is a gap in scholarly research focusing on how Facebook Mom Groups support members experiencing intimate partner violence. Due to this gap in research, the research topic for this literature review was broken into multiple related concepts, taking a broader approach to address the research question, as recommended by Oliver (2012, p. 8). Research sub-topics identified included online support groups for mothers, Facebook Mom Groups, Facebook parenting groups, Facebook groups, female focused online spaces, peer-to-peer support on Facebook, domestic violence / intimate partner violence informal support, and barriers to accessing formal support for domestic violence / intimate partner violence.

Research Approach

Using the key words from the subtopics developed, additional searches through the University of Alberta Library's database, Google Scholar and Elicit were completed. The citation software Paperpile and a Google Form were used to keep a record of the related literature found. The literature produced from the search results was then analyzed and annotated with a particular focus on the theme, context, and validity of each study. Preference was given to scholarly articles published in peer reviewed journals however some grey literature, textbooks, dissertations, and conference papers were also included when the content was deemed appropriate. Throughout the process, the material was read thoroughly with themes,

connections and important quotes noted using a Google Form entry, highlighting the eligibility criteria set.

In addition to using key words to search the online databases, many of the studies included in this literature review were identified through the references included in the original articles found through key word searches. A field on the Google Form titled "sources to pursue" was completed for each piece of literature and developed a list of the references within each article, text or grey literature that might fit the eligibility criteria set. This strategy proved to be quite fruitful and helped locate multiple highly influential studies that were outside of the original key words searched. This strategy also introduced additional subtopics and keywords which were then explored further through the online scholarly databases. Themes from each piece of literature were coded and analyzed, building connections from each subtopic to answer the literature review question stated above.

Thematic Analysis

Facebook Mom Groups: Online Mothering Communities and the Need for Female Focused Spaces

Online support groups and forums, like Facebook Mom Groups, have become and continue to be an important resource and source of connection for mothers. With over three billion monthly active users, engaging with Facebook has become a natural part of many people's daily lives (Statista, 2023). The ease of access and low barriers to entry Facebook provides, have allowed it to become a popular site for mothers to connect with one another through virtual communities (Holtz et al., 015, p. 419). In fact, research has shown that during new motherhood, a particularly vulnerable and sleep deprived time, new mothers spend an increasing amount of time on Facebook (Archer & Kao, 2018; Bartholomew et al., 2012; McDaniel et al., 2012).

While it is still common for mothers to hear the old adage, "it takes a village to raise a child," in today's world, mothers are not experiencing that in person village and support like they

once did (Archer & Kao, 2018; Drentea et al., 2005; Gleeson et al., 2022; Wellstead, 2020). As

Wellstead (2020) states, many mothers are now facing isolation and a lack of support thanks to

the rise of individualism in North American culture (p. 3). Mothers are still expected to perform

the vast majority of parental and domestic labour without the support of a village (Schoenbeck,

2013; Wellstead, 2020). The burden of labour placed on mothers, combined with the lack of

connection and in-person support, has led many women to experience isolation in motherhood

(Bauer et al., 2022; Drentea et al., 2005; Gleeson et al., 22022; Kopacz 2021; McDaniel et al.,

2012; Prescott et al., 2020; Ya'ari et al., 2023). Gleeson et al. (2022) found that all the members

of the Facebook Mom Group they interviewed "stated that they felt isolated in some way and

didn't have the ability to access support in their normal lives" (p. 176). Adding to this pressure is

the fact that our current culture of parenting has "created such a high need for parental

information that it cannot be met by traditional, expert-guided, face-to-face parenting support

groups" (Sjöberg & Lindgren, 2017, pp. 264-265).

Mothers are facing enormous pressure from societal expectations and norms. As a

means of finding support and information, women are now using their shared identity as

mothers, to find their village online. Having female focused online spaces allows women to build

stronger, trusting communities that enable them to ask vulnerable questions and share their

experiences (Kamel, 2022; Lewis et al., 2015; Madge & O'connor, 2006; Pruchniewska, 2019).

As Lewis et al. (2015) explored, women engage less and have their voices silenced in spaces

shared with men (p. 3). Online spaces for women only, also help keep members safe from the

harassment and abuse they are more likely to experience at the hands of men (Kamel, 2022;

Lewis et al., 2015). As Lewis et al. (2015) found, "experiencing an environment where the risk of

men's violence is removed can throw into sharp relief one's (unconscious) self-protection

strategies" (p. 6). Adding to this notion, Lewis et al. shares how dedicated spaces, both online

and in the virtual realm, allow women to be themselves (p. 9). In her study of a Facebook Group

exclusively for female professionals, Pruchniewska (2019) found that "women-only groups were

spaces where not only did women feel heard, but also spaces where they were shielded from negative reactions and harassment from their male peers – as well as the online harassment women endure on the Internet more broadly" (p. 1370). In Kamel's (2022) study of private Facebook Groups for mothers in Egypt, a particularly conservative culture, she found that the exclusivity of these Facebook Groups empowered the female members to discuss topics that would be deemed personal, sensitive and even taboo in their culture (p. 63). Kamel (2022) stated that these groups were "significant spaces for women to share their stories, seek help and find solutions regarding their day-to-day struggles and the societal stigmas they collectively face" (p. 66).

Social Capital: Getting Vulnerable with a Weak-tie Network

Participating in an online parenting community, like the Facebook Mom Groups described in Kamel's (2022) study, allows members to improve their social capital by building a larger network of weak ties and benefit from other members' knowledge, emotional and social support and information sharing (Bartholomew et al., 2012; Chiang & Huang, 2016; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Ellison et al., 2011-a; Ellison et al., 2011-b; Haslam et al., 2017; Hooper et al., 2023; Vitak & Ellison, 2013). Putnam (2000), as quoted in Ellison et al. (2011-b, p. 20) describes two types of social capital "one emanating from weak ties that he calls bridging social capital, and a second that is derived from strong or intimate ties like family relations, called bonding social capital."

In Bartholomew et al.'s (2012) study of new parents' Facebook use, they found that advancements in Internet technology, including the widespread use and popularity of Facebook, have provided new parents with a platform to build and maintain bridging social capital through their weak-tie networks (p. 457). Drentea and Moren-Cross' (2005) study of an online community for mothers concluded that "social capital operates through emotional support, information-giving, and community protection to aid mothers of infants" and that participation in

virtual communities "increases social capital during a time when women are isolated as new mothers" (p. 939).

Many scholars note that a real benefit of participating in these weak tie networks is the ability to post and seek information on more vulnerable topics that members do not feel comfortable discussing with their strong-tie networks of family and friends (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Ellison et al., 2011-b; Ellison et al., 2011-b; Gandy-Guedes et al., 2016; Vitak & Ellison, 2013). As Vitak and Ellison (2013) discovered, when considering posting a request for more intimate support, users carefully evaluate how much information they are willing to share through Facebook and with whom they are willing to share it (p. 246). Ellison et al. (2011-b) also touched on the internal debate of sharing and noted that while users may benefit from sharing personal information online when seeking support, "control over the audience for the information is critical" (p. 22).

When looking specifically at the context of a closed or private Facebook Mom Group, the structure (closed / private) and shared identity of the group (mothers / women only) creates a sense of perceived privacy that enables members to share posts and comment on more vulnerable topics they wouldn't discuss in other settings (Archer et al., 2021, p. 30; Gleeson, 2022, p. 178; Kamel, 2022, p.62). Drentea and Moren-Cross (2005) stated that "because women [in the Facebook Mom Group] have no prior acquaintance, they may be even more open and free to discuss troubles and intimate details in childbearing and rearing that they might not otherwise share in their own circle of family and friends" (p. 921). In Gleeson et al.'s (2022) study of a closed Facebook support group for mothers, participants shared "a clear distinction between their interactions offline and online" (p. 177). The researchers found that "the ability to separate these virtual interactions from tangible 'real life' interactions affords women a sense of protection, enabling them to share on a deeper and more intimate level than they would do with their family and offline friends" (Gleeson, 2022, p. 179).

Posting Anonymously: Accessing Support Without Revealing Your Identity

A number of online mothering communities, including Facebook Mom Groups, have the ability for users to post anonymously. The ability to post anonymously or under a screen name has been highlighted as an online function that promotes the sharing of personal and vulnerable information while seeking support from these weak-tie networks (Andalibi et al., 2016; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Madge & O'connor, 2006; Schoenbeck, 2013). Drentea & Moren-Cross (2005) stated that because of the level of anonymity of the online motherhood site they studied, women were able to express issues more fully and found the anonymity of the site lead to higher levels of trust (p. 937). Madge and O'connor (2006) found that the "level of anonymity was considered important to some of the women using the website because it freed them from any judgemental expectations, they felt health professionals might have of them because of their enquiries" (p. 210).

In their in-depth study of individuals disclosing experiences of sexual assault and rape in the online community reddit, Andalibi et al. (2016) highlighted the use of anonymous "throw-away" accounts, particularly for individuals who noted they were making the disclosure and seeking support for the very first time (p. 7). Andalibi et al. (2016) reflected on the fact that "many abuse and rape events remain unreported to authorities or undisclosed to friends, family and mental health professionals" (p. 8) and shared the importance of online communities and the ability to post anonymously by stating, "these online forums have created alternative spaces where disclosures that might have otherwise remained silent have a voice, and people can seek support" (p. 8). Focusing on mental health self-disclosures in closed Facebook Groups, Rothschild & Aharony (2021) found that "private groups serve as self-help groups" for members seeking support (p. 950).

Lurking: Benefitting from the Hive Mind Without Getting Vulnerable

While some members feel comfortable asking questions, making posts and discussing vulnerable topics, others within the group are considered lurkers (Babić Rosario et al., 2022;

Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Holtz et al., 2015; Mansour, 2021; Sipley, 2022; Sjöberg & Lindgren, 2017; Ya'ari et al., 2023). Sipley (2022) concluded that lurking is an important and common practice within location-based Facebook groups. Lurkers in Sipley's study (2022) used their neighbourhood Facebook Group to "collect information that would improve the quality of their life in their local community" (p. 15) and were motivated by their desire to "understand divergent viewpoints, verify information, supress the spread of misinformation, pivot to offline social action, advance professionally, and maintain quality of community life" (p. 15).

Though lurkers may not be inclined to post their own information and details, they still benefit from the hive mind and large weak-tie network created by online communities. Holtz et al. (2015) found that 20% of their study participants, members of a Facebook Mom Group, indicated they did not comment on questions (p. 419). These findings are on par with past studies, as referenced by Holtz et al. (2015), which determined that "those individuals who do not actively engage with the group, may also benefit and gain feelings of empowerment simply from reading questions and the comments posted by others" (p. 419). In Mansour's (2021) study of members in a Facebook Mom Group for foreign mothers living in Sweden, she found that the most frequent activity members of the group engaged in was lurking and monitoring: "continuous engagement with information activities in the group without continuous active or direct engagement" (p. 217).

Lurkers are gathering information, accessing answers and advice to questions they may also have, and making mental notes about where to find information in the future (Holtz et al., 2015; Mansour 2021; Sipley, 2022; Ya'ari et al., 2023). The practice of lurking means that engagement analytics alone, such as reactions or comments, do not show the full extent and impact of the posts within Facebook Mom Groups and the subsequent comments. As Babić Rosario et al. (2022) stated, members who remained observers, "gained value and support by vicariously experiencing the struggles and successes of other members, and without having to share personal information, vulnerabilities, and transgressions" (p. 22).

Peer-to-Peer Support: Asking the Moms Instead of the Professionals

Both lurkers and active members of Facebook Mom Groups are engaging in a form of peer-to-peer support online. Peer support is a common theme across the studies looking at online communities and different Facebook Groups. Many of the studies highlight group members' preference for asking the group questions instead of looking up the information on a search engine like Google, or asking a professional like a doctor or a psychologist (Archer et al., 2021, p.35; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, p. 931; Holtz et al., 2015, p. 416; Madge & O'connor, 2006, p. 210; Mansour, 2021, p. 215; Morse & Brown, 2021, p. 6). Morse and Brown (2021) found that people trusted their peers more than search engines or professionals because they valued the real-life experience of others who had been in similar situations more (p. 6). Kelly et al. (2022) found that parents who joined a Facebook Group for caregivers of children with complex needs "described significant gaps in their support needs, particularly related to informational needs and navigational support regarding relevant programs, services, and resources" which motivated them to join and participate in the group (p. 6).

As mentioned earlier, building a larger network of weak ties through online communities has enabled members to access a wealth of information and perspectives. Mansour (2021) and Sipley (2022) both found that within location-based groups in particular, members were able to gain specific peer-to-peer knowledge and referrals that matched their unique geographic circumstances, like understanding laws in a certain location or where applicable services are offered. Group members also found it convenient to ask questions of their peers since situations often came up outside of professional office hours and they were able to get a quick response (Gleeson et al., 2022, p. 177; Holtz et al., 2015, p. 416; Mansour, 2021, p. 217; Morse & Brown, 2021, p. 6). Considering the isolation mothers face and the sheer challenge of getting children out of the door or having a conversation on the phone with children present, the studies also found that online support for moms was more convenient and easier to access than traditional support (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, p. 928; Gleeson, et al., 2022, p. 177; Madge &

O'connor, 2006, p. 207; Morse & Brown, 2021, p. 2).

Getting Support: Barriers to Accessing Resources Related to Intimate Partner Violence

Reflecting on the research showing the benefits of participating in Facebook Mom Groups and the safe space for women that many of these groups have been able to create, it makes sense that mothers experiencing intimate partner violence look to these very same groups to seek out resources, information and guidance related to their situation. The research also shows that women experiencing intimate partner violence and domestic violence face many barriers accessing formal supports in addition to challenges getting support from their strong-tie network of family and friends.

The Government of Canada (2022) defines intimate partner violence (IPV) as "a prevalent form of gender-based violence also known as spousal or domestic violence and refers to multiple forms of harm caused by a current or former intimate partner or spouse." The World Health Organization states that "intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence against women" (n.d.-b) and estimates that "26% of women have been subjected to intimate partner violence by a current or former male partner at least once in their lifetime" (n.d.-a). In Canada, 78% of all police-reported cases of intimate partner violence occur among women (Statistics Canada, 2023). Though there are formal supports and services in place in Canada (Government of Canada, 2022), one study found that of the IPV survivors that do seek out formal services, "many report finding the services unhelpful or even retraumatizing" (World Health Organization, n.d.-b).

When accessing formal services and support related to intimate partner violence, like contacting the police, social services or a counsellor, women face many barriers and challenges (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Du Mont et al., 2005; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Fugate, 2005; Gauthier et al., 2021; Guruge & Humphreys, 2009; Michaelsen et al., 2022; Rhodes et al., 2010; Sheehy & Boyd, 2020). Ansara and Hindin (2010) found that "help-seeking is likely to be influenced by a wide range of factors such as socio-economic status, the presence of children,

cultural norms about marriage and the family, and cultural norms about help-seeking more generally" (p. 1017).

Facing Barriers: Isolation, Misconceptions, Real-life Fears, and Negative Experiences

Isolation from friends, family and support services was highlighted as a critical barrier women experiencing intimate partner violence face when wanting to access help (Du Mont et al., 2005; Fugate et al., 2005; Gaurthier, 2021; Guruge & Humphreys, 2009; Michaelsen et al., 2022). As Fugate (2005) explained, isolation showing up as the most common reason for not seeking help could reflect "the abuser's tactic of isolating and shaming the woman, which are common dynamics in domestic violence" (p.299). In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an even bigger environment for isolation, making opportunities for reaching out and accessing support even more challenging (Michaelsen et al., 2022, p. 6). In addition to facing the isolation from motherhood described earlier, mothers impacted by intimate partner violence experience even more severe isolation due to the actions of their partners or ex-partners.

When mothers contemplate reaching out for help, misconceptions around what actions will be taken or need to be taken can inhibit them from contacting formal services, this includes concerns over being forced to leave their partner (Alaggia et al., 2009; Fugate et al., 2005). Mothers face the added complexity and fear that seeking out formal help may result in involvement from child protective services and the potential of losing full custody of their children (Alaggia et al., 2009; Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Du Mont et al., 2005; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2010; Sheehy & Boyd, 2020). And while it may be difficult to imagine a judge granting custody of children to a perpetrator of intimate partner violence, Sheehy and Boyd (2020) found that judges were more likely to negatively focus on mothers engaging in parental alienation (keeping kids away from their fathers), despite the mothers having documented evidence of intimate partner violence (p.9). The researchers found that this negative focus on mothers engaging in parental alienation resulted in the judges granting shared parenting orders (Sheehy & Boyd, 202, p. 9). "A mother who has experienced IPV may

be terrified and re-traumatized at the prospect of having to cooperate with a violent father in relation to child rearing" (Sheehy & Boyd, 2020, p. 10).

With so many barriers, concerns and challenges standing in front of mothers looking for support, it should come as no surprise that most women turn to their informal network of family and friends for help (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Baholo et al., 2015; Du Month, 2005; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Fugate et al., 2005; Gaurthier et al., 2021). As Du Mont et al. (2005) found, far more women were disclosing the abuse they were experiencing to family and friends or neighbours than contacting social services (p. 13). However, while many women do reach out to informal support networks the research also shows that many do not get the help they need. As Fanslow and Robinson (2010) shared, 40% of the women in their study who reported sharing their experience with family or friends indicated that no one tried to help them (p. 938).

Research has shown that these barriers are even more complicated for immigrant women (Alaggia et al., 2009; Guruge & Humphreys, 2009). Both Alaggia et al. (2009) and Guruge and Humphreys (2009) found that immigrant women were in a precarious position, concerned about their immigration status and how reporting the violence might impact their partner's immigration status as well. Many of the women in their studies indicated that their partner was their sponsor for immigration. The women also highlighted cultural differences, language comprehension and systemic racism as barriers to both knowing what services were available to them and for accessing them (Alaggia et al., 2009; Guruge & Humphreys, 2009). Gaurthier (2021) found that many of these experiences were also true for Indigenous women seeking support.

Taking a Risk: The Drawbacks of Seeking Information and Support in Facebook Mom Groups

With all the barriers women seeking support face and the rise in popularity of Facebook Mom Groups, it makes sense that women have turned to these groups for guidance and support related to intimate partner violence. The ability to ask questions anonymously and access a

wide network instantly and discretely makes this help-seeking behaviour very attractive. What these women may not consider however, are the inherit risks of asking for such personal advice and critical information online.

Many of the benefits discussed earlier that have enabled Facebook Mom Groups to become an important information gathering and connection space are also what makes asking for help in a Facebook Mom Group risky. In their study, *Victimization online: The downside of seeking human services for women on the Internet*, Finn and Banach (2000) identified five areas of concern related to seeking this type of information from online groups including "inaccurate information, loss of privacy, disinhibited communication, online harassment, and cyberstalking" (p. 252). As Finn and Bach (2000) shared, the major risk of online groups is the fact that anyone can make up a false identity, claim to be a healthcare or human services expert, create an online support group, invite members to participate, and share information and advice (p. 246). In their study, Finn and Bach (2000) also shared the deeply distressing example of a perpetrator posing as a victim in an online group for sexual abuse survivors (p. 246). This risk is echoed by Schoenbeck (2013), who discussed the use of fake accounts, disinhibition and trolls on the youbemom.com online community, reflected that it is impossible to know if a user is telling the truth or not (p. 6).

In addition to unknown identities, it is difficult to determine the quality of information and advice provided as well as identify misinformation in online groups (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Hooper et al., 2023; Morse & Brown, 2021). As Drentea and Moren-Cross (2005) noted in their study of an online group for mothers, "it was obvious to us that the women often followed the advice of others and were grateful for the information. But there were also a couple of mentions on the board about taking information 'with a grain of salt'" (p. 937). Morse and Brown (2021) reported that some members of the breastfeeding support Facebook Group they studied had trouble understanding who was moderating the conversations and who had appropriate training and therefore "struggled to trust and verify sources" (p.9). And while Hooper et al.

(2023) didn't intend to focus on this aspect of their study on Facebook parenting groups during the pandemic, they discovered that there was a range in the quality of information provided within the group and that it was likely difficult for parents to determine which resources should be used (p. 541).

And with quality concerns about information comes the possibility of misinformation being shared online. In Wang et al.'s (2019) *Systemic literature review on the spread of health-related misinformation on social media* they found that "misinformation is abundant on the internet and is often more popular than accurate information" (p.7). This finding was especially true for topics related to government actions that challenge individual autonomy, like vaccination campaigns for example (Wang et al., 2019, p. 7). Misinformation is of particular concern for women seeking out support and resources related to intimate partner violence because as Wang et al. (2019) also states, "when people are frightened and doubtful, they can be more susceptible to misinformation" (p. 7).

Conclusion

Facebook Mom Groups have become a critical support network for mothers. These closed and private online groups offer mothers a safe space created through the shared identity and experience of motherhood. Thanks to this shared identity, members have the ability to increase their social capital and build a larger network of weak tie connections with whom they feel more comfortable being their authentic selves and sharing vulnerable details about their lives. Mothers experiencing intimate partner violence face significant barriers accessing formal resources or getting help from family and friends. Facebook Mom Groups have now become part of an informal network of mothers around the world and more needs to be understood about these groups as a tool for connecting survivors of intimate partner violence with the support and advice they need to stay safe.

Chapter 3: Methods

From the literature review, we know Facebook Mom Groups have become a virtual safe space for mothers to connect on vulnerable topics, including intimate partner violence. Researching how Facebook Mom Groups support mothers experiencing intimate partner violence will provide insight into both the experience of the member seeking support and the type of support and information provided by the group. By analyzing the posts and comments from a Facebook Mom Group, we can explore the authentic conversations happening within the community, outside of professional guidance and resources. This analysis will help to fill the gap in research and answer the research questions stated below.

Research Questions

- **RQ1:** What type of support do women experiencing intimate partner violence **seek** from other members of a Facebook Mom Group?

- **RQ2:** What type of support do women experiencing intimate partner violence **receive** from other members of a Facebook Mom Group?

Research Design

Research for this study was conducted under the interpretive paradigm using Social Capital Theory. The purpose of this research is to learn more about the types of support women experiencing intimate partner violence seek through posts in Facebook Mom Groups and subsequently, the types of support offered to them by other members of the group.

Throughout the study, it was imperative to maintain the integrity of the Facebook Mom Group and use a "naturalistic setting" in order to produce "more authentic data relevant to the research context" (Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 89). As Merrigan et al. (2012) states, "One way that interpretive researchers gain credibility is to study the social groups to which they already belong. A researcher's degree of membership in a social group can provide a number of advantages" (p. 90). As a mother and member of multiple Facebook Mom Groups, I used this status to collect a secondary data set and act as an "online covert lurker," collecting and

analyzing data posted by group participants, but not interacting or engaging with either the data or the participants in any way (Calvey, 2017, p. 159).

Using mixed methods, qualitative and quantitative content analysis, I have conducted a case study of one, large-scale, international Facebook Mom Group. Given the sensitive nature of my research topic, I chose to conduct my study using content analysis because I could learn directly from the organic interactions already shared without further burdening vulnerable members of the group or potentially re-traumatizing them through other research methods involving direct engagement such as interviews, surveys or focus groups. The methods chosen were able to protect the integrity of the group and the authenticity of the data.

Ethics Approval

Due to my research design including the collection of secondary data and a topic deemed vulnerable, ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board was required for this study. After thorough discussions around my application and proposed research, I received ethics approval to conduct my research with a waiver of consent. Being granted a waiver of consent means that I was able to pull the original posts, comments, and reactions from a Facebook Mom Group without getting informed consent from every group member, due to the impracticality of getting consent from such a large group of people, in addition to the concerns around further burdening individuals experiencing intimate partner violence.

As mentioned earlier, maintaining the privacy, dignity and safety of all members within the Facebook Mom Group studied was of the utmost importance. To meet the ethical requirements for this study, I created two documents containing data. The first document is an original transcription of the data, saved in an encrypted file. The second document is what I used for the content analysis. In this document I removed all member profile names, any first or last names shared, any location references, and any other information in the data that could compromise the anonymity of the individual or the group from the data set analyzed. In addition

to those precautions, only summaries of the data collected have been shared in this report and the transcriptions have not been included in an appendix.

Data Collection

To collect my data, I used purposive sampling to select one Facebook Mom Group to be studied. Originally my research design included an analysis of posts and comments from three different Facebook Mom Groups to triangulate the findings; however, during the ethics approval process I was unable to find multiple groups that met the ethics requirements based on the prevalence of the Facebook Group rule stating, "whatever is shared in this group, must stay in this group." Since the Facebook Mom Groups I was already a member of included the "posts must stay in the group" rule, I used the Facebook search function to find additional groups that I was eligible to join based on the member guidelines set that did not have this rule.

Group Selection Criteria

After completing initial searches for multiple Facebook Mom Groups to study, I realized that I had to update my group selection criteria and expand the search to groups that were not location based. I had originally wanted to use location-based groups from Edmonton and area in hopes of uncovering findings directly related to the communities I live and work in. Here are the guidelines I used to successfully find one Facebook Mom Group for this study:

- The naming convention of the group had to indicate that membership is based on the shared identity of motherhood, using words like "moms, mamas, mothers" for example.

- The group must be closed or private, meaning activities within the group (posting, commenting, reacting) are restricted to group members only. By selecting closed or private groups, we can assume that participation is limited to individuals who are mothers.

- The group must not be run by a social-service agency or professional, health agency, or government organization.

- The group must be set up and administered in English (for my own comprehension).

- The group must be active with a minimum of 3,000 members and two posts per day, with 75% of those posts receiving at least one comment. (Determined based on sampling one week's worth of content.)

- The group must not have any rules or guidelines stating that information shared within the group must stay in the group.

- My membership in the group must meet all group guidelines and criteria.

Facebook Mom Group Selection

After multiple searches and group explorations, I found one Facebook Mom Group that met all the selection criteria and ethics requirements set. The group selected for this case study is an international Facebook Mom Group, based out of the United States of America. At the time of this study, the group had between 50,000 to 90,000 members and did not include a rule about information shared staying within the group. This Facebook Mom Group is a private group that requires members to request and be approved for admission. It is listed as a generalized support group for all moms and run by a team of administrators and moderators. The group appears to be affiliated with a network of other Facebook Mom Groups however it does not appear to be run by social-service or healthcare professionals. The group name indicated that the shared identity of motherhood is required for participation, however I have referred to the group as the "Facebook Mom Group" throughout the study to provide a level of anonymity.

Helpful Definitions to Understand Data Collection

Before reading the data collection, analysis, and findings section, it will be helpful to understand the language I am using to describe the different aspects of the data. Language around Facebook Groups can be ambiguous or confusing at times, for example, consider the use of the word post which can mean both the content shared and the actual action of sharing. Below are some definitions that will provide clarity and shared meaning throughout this study.

Original post: the information (text or image) shared by one group member and published within the Facebook Mom Group for all other members to see and interact with. Original posts show up in the group's feed and may show up in group members' personal Facebook feeds.

Original poster/OP: the individual group member who shares the original post within the group.

Comment/Commentor: The content group members share underneath (in reply to) the original post. Comments are linked to the original post they relate to. Commentors are the individual group members who respond to the original post through text, images, or links.

Reply: Once an individual has commented on an original post, group members are able to respond directly to that comment by selecting "reply." A reply is a sub-comment on the original post.

Administrator/Moderator: Group members who are responsible for managing the Facebook Page and enforcing the rules of the page. Administrators typically have more technical power within the group (can change group settings for example) while moderators are only responsible for monitoring and engaging in the conversations and content.

Reactions: The like, love, wow, angry, care, sad and laugh emojis group members can click on to interact with the original post. (Reactions are also available on comments and replies however for the purpose of this study, reactions were only recorded on the original posts.)

Original Post and Comments Selection Criteria

Once the Facebook Mom Group was selected, I used the Facebook Group search function to identify posts and comments based on the definition of intimate partner violence from the World Health Organization. The World Health Organization (2023) defines intimate partner violence as "behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse

and controlling behaviours. This definition covers violence by both current and former spouses and partners."

When selecting the posts and comments, I decided to include data that were published in the group from January 2022 through April 2024. My decision to not go beyond January 2022 for data collection was to avoid posts that would have been published during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically avoiding the timeframe in which many countries were under "stay at home" guidelines. The purpose of this study is to get a snapshot of what is currently happening and not examine what happened during the pandemic, since we know rates of intimate partner violence increased drastically (Montesanti et al., 2020).

To begin searching for posts, I developed a large list of key words including abuse, abusive, toxic, narcissist, controlling, abusive relationship, domestic violence, violent, violence, intimate partner violence, aggressive, hit, rape, beat, domestic abuse, assault, psychological abuse, controlling, trigger warning, TW, content warning, CW, and sexual assault. During data collection, the words that brought up the most related content included: domestic abuse, domestic violence, abuse, and financial abuse. All original posts selected included one or more of these words while some posts also included further descriptions and examples of intimate partner violence in line with the World Health Organization's definition. It was clear through this search that members favoured the use of terms like abuse or domestic violence over the term intimate partner violence, which did not appear to be common language for the group.

Original posts selected could be shared either anonymously or from a member profile and were not required to have any comments or reactions to be included in the data. All comments and replies on each original post selected were collected and included in the analysis. It is important to note that due to guidance from the Ethics Approval Board, the original posts selected focus exclusively on intimate partner violence and do not include descriptions of child abuse. In total, the data set included 71 original posts, and 1,200 comments/replies.

Data Collection and Management Ethics

As discussed with the Ethics Approval Board, announcing the study within the group or contacting group administrators would have compromised the integrity of the group as a safe space for all members (including administrators/moderators) to seek advice related to intimate partner violence. During data collection, though I was a member of the group, I did not interact or engage with the posts or comments in any way. As Calvey stated in his book *Covert Research: The Art, Politics and Ethics of Undercover Fieldwork,* "a range of sensitive topics can be explored, with the standard ethical protocol of informed consent being typically obviated" when the researcher's presence is not "invasive or intrusive" and as long as anonymity is used and there is no harm done to the participants (2017, p. 159). To ensure the integrity of the group remained intact, I included many ethical considerations and safeguards for the data collection and transcription process.

As an approved group member, I was able to see and search for the posts and comments related to this study. Following the ethics requirements to maintain one original transcription, I manually copy and pasted all original posts, comments and replies into an encrypted Excel spreadsheet. I then created a second spreadsheet with the data anonymized for analysis. To anonymize the data, I created pseudonym for the group name (Facebook Mom Group), changed the Facebook profile names to numbered codes and replaced any identifying data (names, location references, location-based services) with place-holder text e.g. [Local Women's Shelter]. The encrypted original data and anonymized data has been stored on a password protected computer. In line with record keeping best practices, the transcript and data will be kept for a five-year period before being deleted.

Data Analysis

After completing data collection and transcribing the content into an Excel spreadsheet, I analyzed the data using both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The coding process was iterative and required a significant amount of work to be done manually. I used an inductive

approach to develop the themes, categories and codes but gave myself the flexibility to add new

categories or codes as needed. During the qualitative content analysis, I used an inductive

approach to develop the sub-themes that emerged from the data including the original post

content themes and the support provided sub-themes explored in the findings. I began with the

Excel spreadsheet of the anonymized data set that included:

- Date of data collection

- Post ID (created during transcription to link original posts with comments/replies)

- Search keyword used to find the post

- Date of post published

- Post type (original post, comment, reply)

- Author tags (moderator, administrator, author, etc.)

- Original post type (profile, anonymous, anonymous for a friend)

- Content (what was written in the original post or comment/reply)

- Total number of comments/replies on the original post

- Number of reactions received on the original post (like, love, wow, angry, care, sad, and
  laugh)

Once the spreadsheet was complete, I uploaded it into the qualitative content analysis

software, NVivo. Using coding sheets, I created a list of categories and codes in NVivo and

began going through the data. The codes created were "exhaustive and mutually exclusive"

ensuring that the "categories completely and comprehensively describe a message population,

meaning that no relevant messages from that population are left out of the coding scheme"

(Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 139). Following the advice of Merrigan et al. (2012), I tested the coding

schemes developed multiple times on sample data before undertaking the full content analysis

(p. 135). This testing and checking process was iterative and continued until the coding sheet

met the criteria of being both exhaustive and mutually exclusive, especially as additional codes

and themes were identified. The final coding sheets utilized can be found below in *Tables 1.0 and 2.0.*

   While coding, I utilized the "cases" function in NVivo to separate the data based on the different types of posts I was analyzing (original posts versus comments and replies). First, I analyzed the content of the original posts then moved onto the comments/replies. After completing the content analysis in NVivo, I created an additional Excel spreadsheet to record all the data in quantitative terms for both the original posts and the comments/replies. Using the different filtering options in the findings spreadsheet I developed, I was able to further analyze the data and make meaningful observations.

Table 1.0

Coding Sheet Used for Original Posts

Original Post Coding		
Theme	**Category**	**Code**
Intimate partner violence	Type of support requested	Confirmation of abuse Advice Emotional support Resources Social network
	Type of abuse shared	Controlling behaviours Emotional abuse Financial abuse Physical abuse Sexual abuse General abuse
	Content theme	Legal processes Parenting Relationship Supporting a friend Need for shelter Medical Leaving Financial Custody Coping / dealing with current or past abuse Celebrating of leaving Awareness and education Abortion – unplanned pregnancy
	Original post type	Profile

Original post details		Anonymous Anonymous for a friend
	Original post engagement	Total comments/replies received Number of reactions received (like, love, wow, angry, care, sad, laugh) Total reactions received

Table 2.0

Coding Sheet Used for Comments and Replies

Comments and Replies Coding		
Theme	**Category**	**Codes**
Intimate partner violence	Type of support offered	Confirmation of abuse Advice Emotional support Resources Social network
Comment details	Comment type	Comment Reply to comment
	Author tags	Author (Original poster) Moderator Administrator
	Negative or judgemental comment	Yes No

Based on how I set up my data, I faced some challenges in terms of easily connecting the original posts back to their comments/replies in NVivo. This resulted in a lot of time spent manually referencing the coding system created, especially when trying to determine whether the original posters received the type of support they were requesting. If I were to replicate this study in the future using NVivo, I would format my data differently, with one spreadsheet per original post (including comments and replies) instead of having one master spreadsheet with all the data together.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the research conducted on how Facebook Mom Groups support members experiencing intimate partner violence. The findings take a deep dive into the original posts shared and a higher-level overview of the comments and replies the posts received. The posts and comments/replies were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative content analysis to answer the research question and highlight themes. In total 71 original posts and 1,200 comments and replies were collected for analysis. The results have been organized to look at the original posts first, followed by the comments and replies.

Analysis of Original Posts

Through the data collection process, 71 original posts were identified as meeting the requirements for this research project and underwent further analysis. Original posts are the initial post a group member has submitted to be shared on the timeline of the Facebook Mom Group. The original poster (OP) is the individual who wrote the original post and submitted it to the group to be published. To answer the research question, the original posts were analyzed to understand: what type of profile they were posted from, what kind of support the OP was looking for, the theme of the content within their post, the type of abuse they describe in the post, whether or not they commented or replied to a comment on their own post, and whether or not they received the type of support they requested through the comments.

Profile Types in Original Posts

Figure 1.0

Profile Types Used in Original Posts
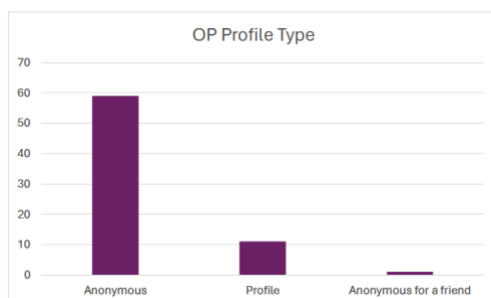
In a Facebook Mom Group, there are multiple ways in which a member can share a post within the group including: using their own Facebook profile (which may or may not include their legal first and last name), posting as an anonymous group member, or by having a moderator, administrator, or other group member post on behalf of someone else. Of the 71 original posts analyzed, 83.1% (N=59) were posted anonymously, 15.5% (N=11) were posted from an individual Facebook profile, and 1.4% (N=1) posted anonymously for a friend.

Content Themes in Original Posts

Figure 2.0

Main Themes Shared in Original Posts

Original post themes
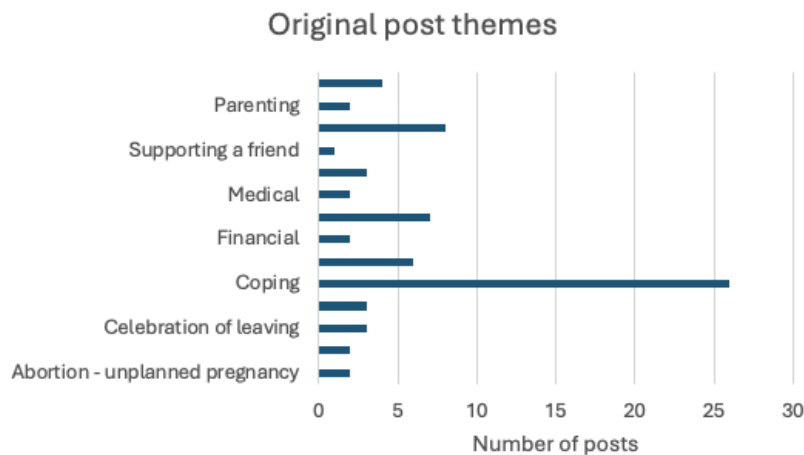
Using qualitative content analysis, each original post was coded to determine an over-arching theme for the type of information shared related to the support the OP was seeking. In this coding process, each original post could only be coded into one unique theme. The top theme identified was "coping/dealing with current or past abuse" and accounts for 36.6% (N=26) of the original posts. Original posts within this theme include a description of the OP's situation and feelings. The posts discuss the challenges of being in an abusive relationship with a current intimate partner and of life after leaving an abusive relationship. Original posters in this category talked about how they are struggling to cope with their current situation and feelings. Examples of original posts coded to coping/dealing with current or past abuse include: an OP worried

about being controlled again in a new relationship and feeling guilty that she felt free when her abusive partner died in an accident (64A-OP); an OP who experienced intimate partner violence when she had her first child and feels guilty about it now that she is out of that relationship and has welcomed a second child into a loving, happy home (05A-OP); and an OP who feels angry that their abusive ex is treating their new partner well, while the OP is left with the hurt and trauma from their abuse (06A-OP).

In addition to coping, original posters also sought support related to their "relationships" with 11.3% (N=8). Posts coded to "relationship" included a description of relationship dynamics between the OP and their abuser. The posts discussed how best to navigate specific scenarios with their abuser including looking for hope that their relationship could be mended. Examples of original posts coded to relationships include: an OP wondering whether they should stay in a relationship with a partner who emotionally abuses them (26A-OP); an OP who is embarrassed that a fight with their spouse escalated to physical violence and wants to know if it is possible to reconcile their relationship because they have a small child and this is the first time physical violence has occurred (36A-OP); and an OP who shares a disagreement she had with her current partner (who has a history of abusive and controlling behaviours) and asks the group if her perspective and actions were wrong, based on his reaction (24A-OP).

"Leaving" was tagged as the third most frequent theme with 9.9% (N=7) of the posts talking about leaving their abusive partner. These posts include information that indicates the OPs are ready and want to leave a current abusive relationship with an intimate partner. In sharing their information with the group, they are looking for support with the process of leaving. Examples of original posts coded to leaving include: an OP who asks, "how do I get out of my house?" (48A-OP); an OP who wants to know if anyone else has left and started their lives over successfully (29A-OP); and an OP who is planning to leave their abusive partner and go to a women's shelter but would like to know what it is like and what to bring (56A-OP).

The fourth highest theme focused on "custody." Of the original posts, 8.5% (N=6) were looking for support related to custody and the issues associated with sharing custody or the potential of sharing custody with their abuser. Posters wrote about concerns related to successfully gaining full custody, specifics around custody arrangements and parenting orders, and concerns about how the court process works. Examples of original posts coded to custody include: an OP who wants to know if leaving her abusive partner and taking her kids with her will be considered kidnapping (02A-OP); an OP who asks whether she legally needs to let her child's father see their children (07A-OP); and an OP whose ex-partner is making claims about getting shared custody once they complete a court mandated program (58A-OP).

There was a wide variety of other themes identified in the original posts. The remaining posts were coded as: 5.6% (N=4) legal processes, 4.2% (N=3) need for shelter, 4.2% (N=3) coparenting, 4.2% (N=3) celebration of leaving, 2.8% (N=2) abortion and unplanned pregnancy, 2.8% (N=2) medical, 2.8% (N=2) financial, 2.8% (N=2) parenting, 2.8% (N=2) awareness and education, and 1.4% (N=1) supporting a friend.

Type of Abuse Shared in Original Posts

Figure 3.0

Type of Abuse Shared in Original Posts.
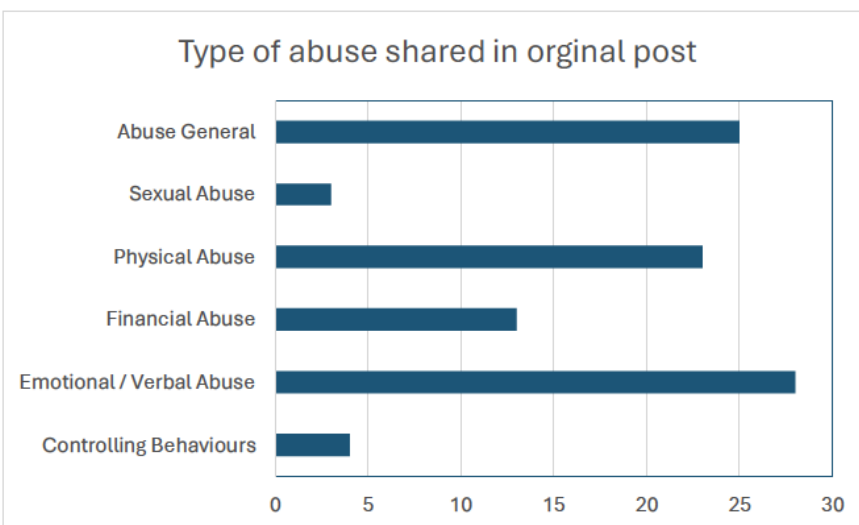
As part of the criteria for selection, each original post includes either a description or the use of words related to intimate partner violence/domestic violence. While this study focuses on intimate partner violence in particular (violence perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner), common language in the Facebook Mom Group includes references to the general terms of abuse and domestic violence. The additional context and details within the post provided enough information to conclude that the violence described was being perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner of the OP versus another family member.

Many posters described multiple forms of intimate partner violence within their post, each form of violence described was coded within the post, meaning one original post may be coded to multiple themes. However, posts coded under "abuse in general" are exclusive to that individual theme.

Of the different types of abuse experienced, "emotional or verbal abuse" had the highest occurrence, with 28 mentions within the 71 original posts. The second highest occurrence was seen in "abuse in general" with 25 of the original posts simply using the terms abuse, abusive, domestic violence, or domestic abuse within their post but not elaborating further. The third highest reference within the posts was to "physical abuse" with 23 of the posts either using the words physical abuse or describing it (e.g. "*My partner hit me…", "My ex beat me up…", "He has choked me until I passed out…", "He attacked me…").* The remaining types of abuse shared include: 13 instances of financial abuse, 4 of controlling behaviours, and 3 of sexual abuse.

Type of Support Requested in Original Posts

Figure 4.0

Type of Support Requested in Original Posts.
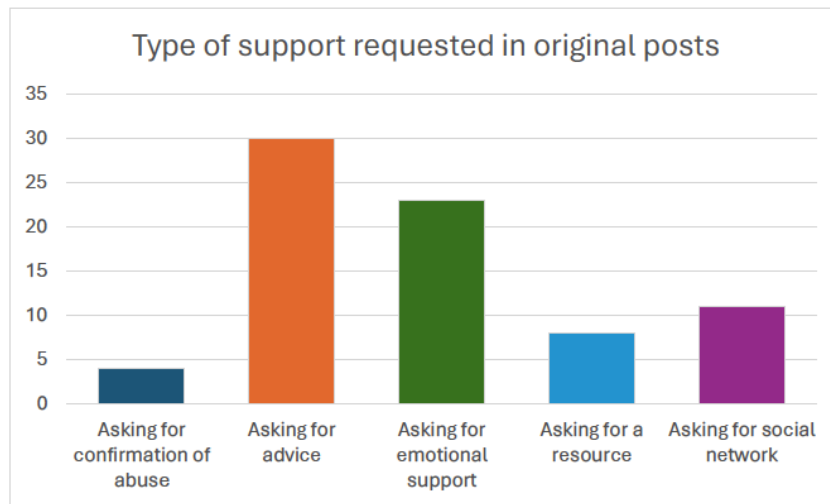
Original posts were coded to determine the type of support the OPs were requesting based on the content of their post. The majority of the posts fit neatly into one category however, when a post contained explicit details on multiple types of support the OP was looking for, each specific type of support was coded. For example, one original post included the text, *"I need advice, experiences and resources."* It was therefore coded to reflect all three types of support. The percentages included in this section reflect the type of support requested divided by the total number of original posts. Due to some posts specifically requesting more than one type of support, the total percentages combined will be greater than 100.

See Figure 4 for an overview of the five types of support: asking for advice, asking for emotional support, asking for social network, asking for a resource, and asking for confirmation of abuse. Of the five types of support identified, 42.9% (N=30) of original posters were seeking "advice" from the other members related to their own situation. "Asking for emotional support or venting" was the second highest type of support requested with 32.4% (N=23) either directly asking members for emotional support or sharing their feelings through venting without a

specific question or request for support. Though it could be argued that all the original posts shared in the Facebook Mom Group could be considered a request for "social network," 15.5% (N=11) of the original posts asked explicitly for social network support including seeking out the personal experience of other group members and seeking out someone to talk to. 11.3% (N=8) of OPs asked for support accessing or finding a specific resource like a domestic violence shelter, for example. And 5.6% (N=4) of the original posts were seeking support in determining whether or not their situation should be considered abuse or "confirmation of abuse." In these posts, the OPs would describe their experience and directly ask the group, "is this abuse?". Of the four posts identified under this code, three were looking for confirmation of financial abuse and one was looking for confirmation of emotional abuse (in which they included the question, "can it be emotional abuse if I deserved it?*").*

Support Received in Original Posts

Original posts were analyzed in relation to the comments and replies they received. This was done to determine whether or not the original posters were successful in getting the support they had asked for. To make this determination, I manually looked at the "support requested" coding for each original post and compared it to the "support provided" coding for each of the comments and replies the original post received. If the OP received a comment or reply coded to the same type of support they requested, then the post was considered successful. Of the 71 posts analyzed, 84.5% (N=60) received the type of support the original poster requested through the comments and replies.

While every single post received at least one comment, not all of the comments matched the type of support the OP asked for. For example, if the OP asked for advice but they received a comment with a link to another Facebook Group to connect with (coded as social network support), while they did receive support, they did not receive the type of support they requested. It should also be noted that this coding does not consider the quality of the support provided or

the satisfaction of the OP with the support they received – additional research would need to be conducted to uncover that level of detail and lived experience.

Support Not Received in Original Posts

Figure 5.0

Original Posts Where Support Was Not Received: Type of Support Requested
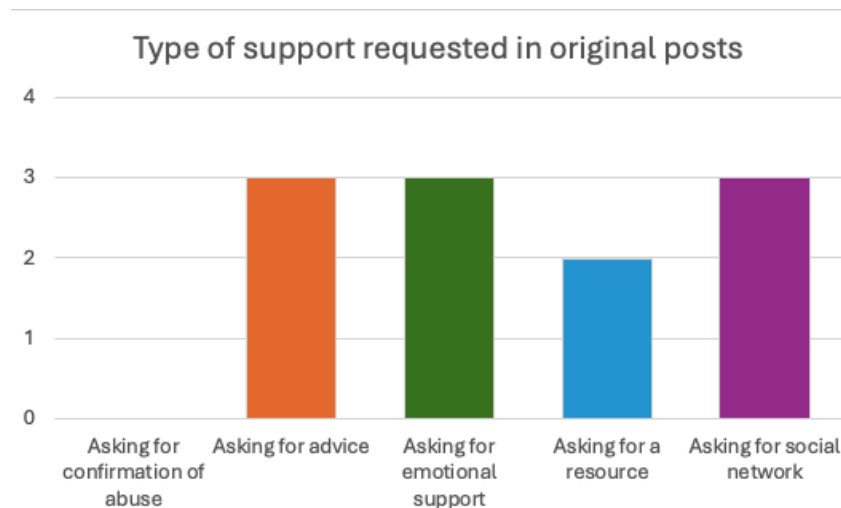
While 60 out of the 71 original posts received the type of support requested, 11 out of the 71 did not. The analysis in this section focuses on the eleven original posts that were coded as not receiving the type of support they requested. Of these eleven original posts, three were looking for advice, three were seeking emotional support, three were asking for social network (personal experience), and two were hoping to find a resource. The overall theme of the posts included: coping (4 posts), coparenting (2 posts), custody (1 post), financial (1 post), leaving (1 post), legal processes (1 post), and need for shelter (1 post). When comparing the themes and types of support requested in the original posts that did not receive support with those that did, no meaningful patterns can be identified to better understand the discrepancy, this may be due to the small sample size.

Receiving Negativity and Judgement

In addition to analyzing how many original posts received the support they were seeking, I also looked at how many original posts received negative or judgemental comments. The purpose of this inquiry was to better understand the experience of the original poster when engaging the group. Negative or judgemental comments included comments that attacked the original poster's situation, actions, or decisions. Out of the 71 original posts, only 6 posts (8.5%) received comments/replies that were deemed to be negative or judgemental in nature. This indicates that the majority of posts received comments that were positive and supportive or neutral. Coding negative and judgemental comments was determined by the context of the comment or reply within the conversation, as well as the OPs response (if they responded). For example, one OP responded to what they interpreted as a judgemental comment by saying the commenter had a weird definition of the word "support" because they were questioning the experience of the OP. Negative and judgemental comments will be discussed further in the analysis of comments and replies later in this chapter.

Author Engagement in Original Posts

One of the unique aspects of seeking support and information online is the fact that two-way communication can take place. In the Facebook Mom Group, original posters, whether they have posted from their own profile or anonymously, are able to respond to the comments and replies they receive on their post. When the OP comments or replies to a comment on their own post, the word "author" appears next to their username (profile name or Anonymous Member) to indicate that they shared the original post. Of the 71 original posts, 36 (50.7%) of the OPs engaged with their own post by commenting or replying to a comment they received. This finding highlights the number of original posters who have taken advantage of the two-way communication function of the Facebook Group versus passively receiving the comments and replies shared with them. Though out of scope for this research project, this finding may

correlate to the benefits and motivations of seeking out support related to intimate partner violence in a Facebook Mom Group.

Number of Comments/Replies Received on Original Posts

In total, the 71 original posts received 1,200 comments and replies. The top five posts with the most comments and replies (71A-OP, 70A-OP, 69A-OP, 26A-OP, 48A-OP) received 256, 145, 82, 77, and 76 comments and replies in respectively. The median number of comments/replies received was 5.0, the mode was 1.0, the mean was 17.1 and the standard deviation was 37.39. Of the top five posts that generated the most comments/replies, three were asking for confirmation of abuse and two were asking for advice. The themes from the top five posts include coping (1 post), leaving (1 post), and relationship (3 posts). The original posters engaged with their own posts through comments or replies in four of the top five posts. And two out of the top five (40%) received negative or judgemental comments.

Though the sample size is small, these findings suggest that when original posters engage with their own post, they receive more comments and replies. In looking at the content of the top five posts, there also appeared to be a trend of the OPs clearly stating their request for support by using direct language like, "what would you do?"; "what do you think?"; and "I need advice" in their post. It is also interesting to note that the original posts that received the most comments and replies had a significantly higher likelihood of receiving negative and judgemental comments compared to the total sample size (40% versus 8.5%). This could be explained by the content of the posts being considered more controversial and therefore gaining more attention and engagement.

Number of Reactions Received on Original Posts

Figure 6.0

Number of Facebook Reactions Received Across All Original Posts
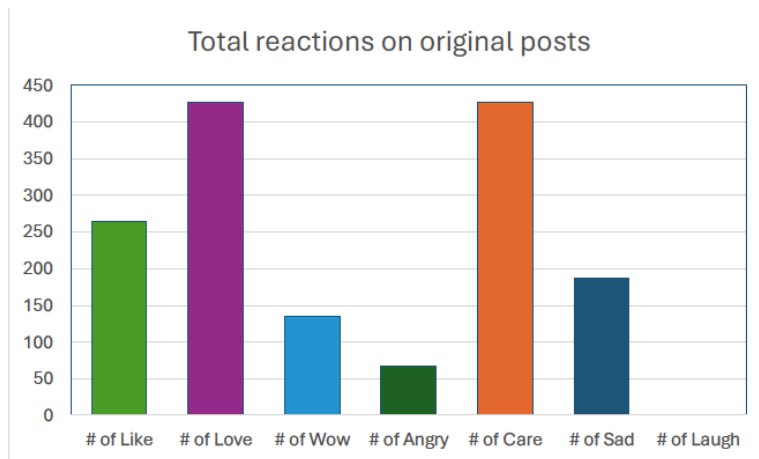
Facebook reactions (like, love, care, sad, wow, angry and laugh) were recorded for each original post to help show the level of engagement the different posts received from members of the group. In total, 1,508 reactions were received across the 71 original posts. Except for three posts (60A-OP, 08A-OP, 24A-OP), all original posts received at least one reaction from group members. There was a large standard of deviation on the number of reactions received per post (68.41) with the median number of reactions at 2, the mode at 1 and the mean at 21. In total, the 71 posts received 427 love, 427 care, 265 like, 187 sad, 135 wow, 67 angry, and 0 laugh reactions.

The posts that received the top five most reactions (426, 298, 256, 125, 46) included the following two themes: celebration of leaving (3 posts) and relationship (2 posts). Interestingly, two of the posts with the highest number of reactions, also had the highest number of comments and replies (OP70A and OP71A).

Analysis of Comments and Replies

As previously stated, 1,200 comments and replies were collected in the data set. Comments and replies to comments were coded together, however for reference, 70.9%

(N=851) were comments and 29.1% (N=349) were replies to comments. Of these comments and replies, 122 of them (10.2%) were from the author or original poster. For the comment analysis, the 122 author comments were taken out of the data set, leaving 1,078 comments and replies from other group members in the analysis.

During data collection it was noted that occasionally the total number of comments listed on the original posts (1,213) did not match the actual total number of comments (1,200) that existed on the post. This discrepancy can be accounted for by comments being deleted or by members who commented no longer being part of the group. In some cases, members pointed out directly that comments had been deleted. Every original post (71/71) received at least one comment.

Type of Support Provided in Comments and Replies

Figure 7.0

Type of Support Provided in Comments and Replies
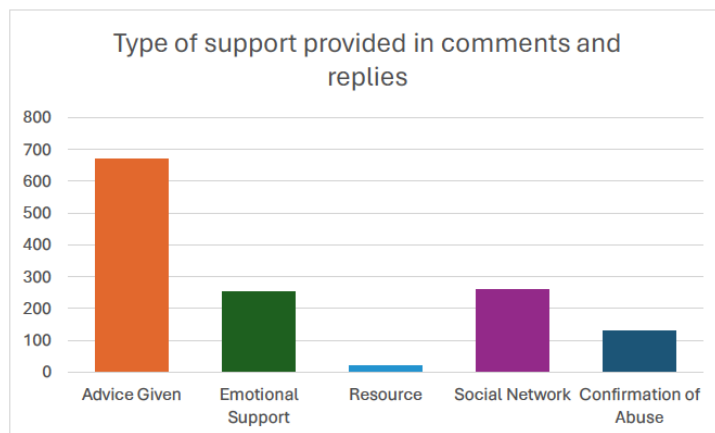
The comments and replies were coded under the same descriptions used for the types of support requested by the original posters. Many comments provided more than one type of support and were coded accordingly. For example, one comment may have included a personal experience (social network) followed by direct advice for the original poster (summarized example: "When I was in this situation, I did this... I think you should contact a really great lawyer in your area"), or the comment may have included confirmation of the abuse, followed by

emotional support (summarized example given: "Yes, this is financial abuse. I am so sorry you are experiencing this, sending you love and prayers").

From the comments and replies, support provided included: 62.2% (N=670) advice, 23.9% (N=258) social network, 23.5% (N=253) emotional support, 12.1% (N=130) confirmation of abuse, and 1.9% (N=21) resource (see Figure 7.0). Because some comments included more than one type of support, the percentages in this section reflect the number of comments/replies coded to each type of support offered, divided by the total number of comments and will be greater than 100% when combined. Due to the volume of data, each type of support was coded into additional sub-themes to gain better insights into the information shared.

Advice in Comments and Replies

The most common type of support provided within the comments/replies was advice, with 670 instances within the 1,078 comments. Within the advice provided, nine different sub-themes emerged: 31% (N=208) leave the relationship, 21.9% (N=147) contact a professional or access a resource, 20.7% (N=139) other advice specific to the original poster's situation, 10% (N=67) legal processes, 6% (N=40) document everything, 4.6% (N=31) think about how your kids are watching and learning, 4.5% (N=30) talk to your friends and family, 0.7% (N=5) save money for yourself, and 0.4% (N=3) you might be able to fix your relationship.

Figure 8.0

Sub-themes Identified in the Types of Advice Provided
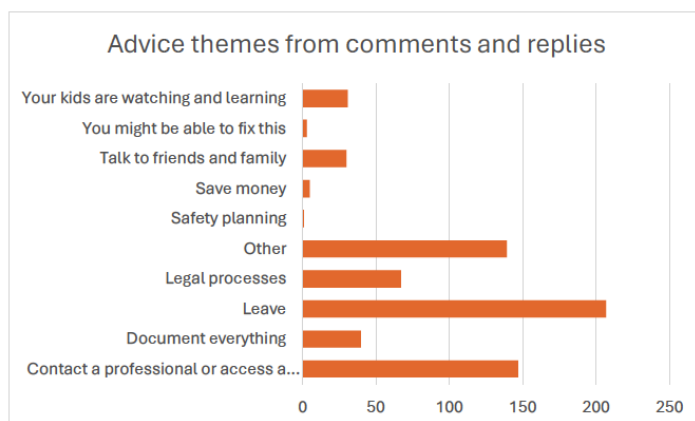
Social Network in Comments and Replies

The second most common type of support provided by the other members of the Facebook Mom Group was social network support, with 258 instances or 23.9%. Sub-themes identified within the social network support included: 60.9% (N=157) sharing personal experience, 18.6% (N=48) suggesting another Facebook Page or social media account to follow for support, 14.3% (N=37) encouraging the OP to send them a private message, 3.9% (N=10) providing another form of social network like offering to search for resources and asking how they can help, 2.3% (N=6) connecting the OP with another individual who might be able to help.

Figure 9.0

Sub-Themes Identified in the Social Network Support Provided
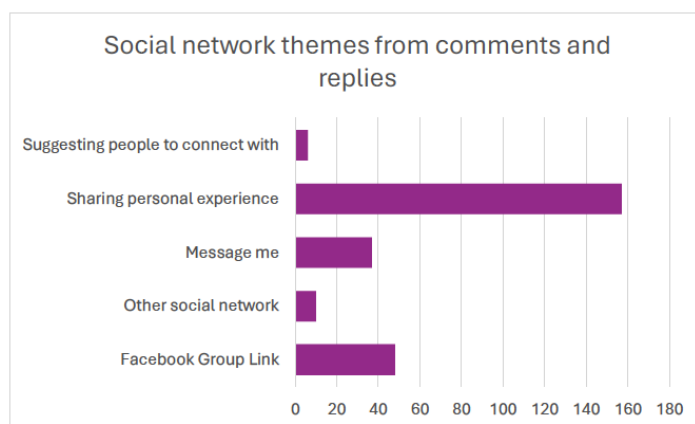
Emotional Support in Comments and Replies

Group members provided emotional support in 23.5% (N=253) of the comments and replies shared. Emotional support shared included comments like: "praying for you"; "proud of you"; "I'm sorry"; "you got this"; "sending you support"; "sending love"; "sending positive vibes"; "you're doing great"; "proud of you"; "God bless you and your family"; "so happy for you"; "you deserve better"; "this is not your fault"; "good luck mama"; and "take it easy on yourself."

Confirmation of Abuse in Comments and Replies

Of the comments and replies, 130 (12.1%) provided the original poster with confirmation of whether the OP's experience should be considered abuse. Of the 130 comments, 97.7%

(N=127) told the OP they would consider what was shared to be defined as abuse and 2.3%

(N=3) told the OP they did not consider what was shared to be defined as abuse.

Resources in Comments and Replies

Figure 10.0

Sub-themes Identified in Resources Provided
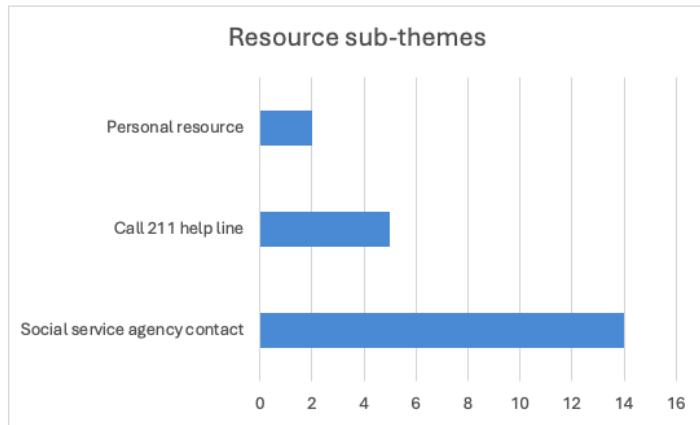
Within the data, there were 21 instances (1.9%) of group members providing the original

posters with resources. It is important to note the distinction between what has been coded as a

resource compared to what data was coded as the sub-theme "contact a professional or access

a service" under advice. Data that included a general description of what the OP should look

into (e.g. "*You need to find a good lawyer"; "You should find a women's shelter in your area";*

and "You should go to a hospital") was coded as advice while data that included the actual

contact information or name of an organization or service (e.g. *"Call Helping Women at 555-*

555-5555") was coded as a resource. It should also be noted that based on the Facebook

Group's rules, members are not allowed to ask for or receive money or physical items from each

other.

The sub-themes identified in the resources provided include: 50% (N=14) social service

agency contact information, 17.9% (N=5) recommended calling 211, 7.1% (N=2) offered a

personal resource (a house with a vacancy and a free family law consultation).

Sentiment Analysis: Negative or Judgemental Comments and Replies

As mentioned earlier in the original post analysis, 8.5% (N=6) of the original posts received a negative or judgemental comment/reply. In total, 23 comments (2.1% of all the comments/replies) were coded as being negative or judgemental, based on the context and reactions received. Examples of comments interpreted as negative or judgemental, directed to the original poster include: the OP being asked to provide examples of the abuse and to define the abuse they were experiencing, accusations of fraud as related to accessing government benefits, questioning the OP's decision to stay in the relationship, questioning the choices of the OP, and questioning the behaviours of other people involved in the OP's life.

Professional Support Provided in Comments and Replies

When providing support, group members identified themselves as a professional in seven of the comments/replies (0.09%). Though it is difficult to confirm whether or not the declaration is true (one of the many challenges for the original posters as they filter through the comments/replies), group members identified themselves as: a mandated court reporter, a domestic violence advocate, a labour and delivery nurse, a social worker, domestic violence organization staff members, and a family lawyer.

Evidence of Lurkers in Comments and Replies

As explored in the literature review, the information and advice shared on Facebook Mom Groups is digested by more than just the original poster and the commentors. Lurkers within the group are also reading the post and comments/replies to learn more about the topic and support provided. Within the data, two separate comments directly indicated a visible lurking status. One commentor posted a period, which allows them to receive notifications on the post without providing any actual content and another commentor posted stating that they didn't have advice but were following the thread for their own information gathering. Though not significant in numbers, (0.2% of comments/replies) these posts provide an indication that others were also following for information.

Administrator and Moderator Engagement in Comments and Replies

The Facebook Mom Group examined in this case study is a sophisticated group with 20 group moderators/administrators and connections to related Facebook Mom Groups based on location and special interests, including a specific Facebook Mom Group for domestic violence support. Of the original posts, 56.3% (N=40) received at least one comment from a group administrator or moderator. Within the 1,078 comments/replies, 48 (4.5%) came from someone actively tagged as an administrator or moderator. It is estimated that the admins and moderators were also responsible for 97.9% (N=47) of the social network support provided that included a link to another Facebook Page, which appeared to be part of the Facebook Mom Group's existing network. This finding is an estimate because it appears some members may have been administrators or moderators at the time of their comment however, they were not administrators or moderators at the time of data collection and therefore no longer had the tag on their profile.

Administrators and moderators also played an important role in reminding members of the group rules and guidelines on posts they deemed to be particularly sensitive or on the line of being acceptable. The admin/moderators shared nine comments (0.8%) that were administrative in nature including: 44.4% (N=4) reminding people to be respectful in their comments and to tag an admin if moderating was needed, 22.2% (N=2) warning OPs not to accept legal advice from the group, 22.2% (N=2) closing the comments on a post and encouraging members to engage with other posts, and 11.1% (N=1) reminding members that money cannot be asked for or given in the group.

Network Analysis of Group Members in Comments and Replies

To better understand the network of group members providing support to the original posters, the profile names of the individuals who provided comments or replies were coded to look for patterns. To conduct the network analysis, I used the list of profile names in the original transcription, alphabetized them, then replaced each name with a numbered code. After the

codes were established, I used the data in the spreadsheet to look for duplicates and manually count the number of comments and replies associated to each code. All comments and replies shared by the authors of the original post were removed from the data.

In total it is estimated that 742 unique individuals are responsible for the 1,078 comments and replies on the 71 original posts studied. The average number of comments per individual is 1.4 with a mean and median of 1 and a standard deviation of 0.64. Of the 742 individuals, 157 people (21.2%) commented more than once and 67 people (9.0%) commented on two or more posts. The top five number of comments or replies shared by one individual are: 13, 13, 10, 10, and 9. The top five number of posts commented on by one individual are: 9, 8, 6, 6, and 5. Of the top 5 commentors for both number of posts and number of comments/replies, only one individual is tagged as a current administrator/moderator.

A limitation of this network analysis includes the fact that the actual Facebook profiles were not investigated. The coding was done exclusively by the name recorded in data collection, so it is possible that multiple individuals with the same Facebook profile name have been coded as one.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings show a clear picture of the authentic interactions taking place within the Facebook Mom Group when members post looking for support related to experiences of intimate partner violence. In the discussion chapter I will interpret the findings and highlight important themes, providing meaningful insight and context to further answer the research questions: what kind of support do members of Facebook Mom Groups seek when posting about intimate partner violence and what kind of support do they receive?

Benefits of the Weak-tie Network

As an online community formed by a weak-tie network, the findings from the Facebook Mom Group studied complement many of the themes highlighted in the literature review while doing a deep dive into posts specifically focused on experiences of intimate partner violence. With 84.5% of the original posts receiving the support they requested and 100% of the posts receiving at least one comment or type of support, the OPs were able to benefit from the social capital their membership in the Facebook Mom Group afforded them. Though I did not record this specifically in the content analysis, I did notice a trend of original posters indicating they did not have anyone else to talk to or were unable to ask their friends or family for support. This trend is in line with previous research which found that online communities comprised of weak-tie networks allow members to share and seek information on topics they are not able to discuss with their strong-tie networks like family or friends (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Ellison et al., 2011-b; Ellison et al., 2011-b; Gandy-Guedes et al., 2016; Vitak & Ellison, 2013).

Original posters also benefited from the ability to post anonymously with 84.5% of the posts shared using the "post anonymously" function and only 15.5% shared using a Facebook profile. The ability to post anonymously within the group may have increased the number of members willing to disclose the details of their abusive relationship and seek support. Just like Andalibi et al. (2016) found in their study, this Facebook Mom Group has created a space where members who may have otherwise been silent have come to find support. A finding also

highlighted in the studies of Drentea & Moren-Cross (2005), Madge & O'connor (2006) and Schoenbeck (2013): being able to post anonymously or under a screen name promotes the sharing of personal and vulnerable information.

Contrary to the discussion around anonymity and sharing vulnerable information, I was surprised to find many disclosures of current or past experiences of intimate partner violence, and family violence within the comments section. Of the total comments received, 157 consisted of group members sharing their own personal experiences, posted directly from their Facebook profiles. This finding was notable due to the volume of individuals willing to share their own vulnerable stories despite the fact that as a commentor, they did not have the option to post anonymously. Commentors shared stories both as survivors of intimate partner violence and as individuals who had witnessed intimate partner violence or family violence as a child – sharing a different perspective from the OP's lens as a survivor of IPV. The willingness of the commentors to share their personal experiences showcases the reason members come to Facebook Mom Groups for peer-to-peer support. Just as Morse and Brown (2021) found, it is probable that the OPs may trust the real-life experience of others who have been in similar situations more than search engines or professionals. Luckily for the original posters, the other members of the group were willing to share their stories and support.

Challenges Navigating the Comments

During the analysis, I also uncovered several challenges that could make it difficult for the OPs to successfully get the information and support they were searching for. Just as Hooper et al. (2023) noticed in their study, there appeared to be a wide range in the quality of information provided within the group, left up to the original poster to decipher. Out of the total comments received, seven commentors identified themselves as professionals to help legitimize the support they were offering. On the opposite side of the spectrum, some of the commentors got quite vindictive towards the original posters' abusive partners and provided some concerning advice. In one original post (71A-OP) for example, the OP described a scenario that involved

their partner losing their temper over the sight of menstrual blood and some commentors suggested the OP leave their partner and home immediately but spread menstrual blood throughout the house on the way out. On another post (48A-OP), commentors questioned why the OP's brother had not stepped in and shown the OP's abusive partner what it feels like "to pick on someone his own size."

Coding the comments based on the quality of advice or information provided was out of scope for this case study and warrants future research however, it was evident during the analysis that some comments may be more problematic than helpful, even if the intention of the comments was to show support to the OP. This consideration also includes the negative or judgemental comments 8.5% of the original posts received. For example, one of the negative/judgemental comments included a message indicating the OP's (70A-OP) abusive partner must provide great sexual pleasure in order for the OP to continue the relationship, because the commentor felt there was no other reason the OP could possibly have to stay in the relationship. Even without a social work background, it is plain to see that these comments, though in the minority, are not helpful or conducive to providing the OPs with appropriate information or support. Not to mention the emotional toll on the OP reading all of these comments when they are likely already in a state of distress.

Another feature of the findings that stood out was the varying level of engagement the original posts received. While most posts received just one comment, the ten original posts with the highest number of comments ranged from 25 to 256 comments and replies. When considering the OP's experience involving the posts with high engagement, the OP would have received a notification for each comment and reply and had to sort through the information provided to determine what was useful and valid for their situation, and what was not.

During the analysis I also noticed a unique challenge for the OPs who received the highest number of comments, conversations started to take place between the commentors, outside of the discussion directly with the OP and often included discussions about the OP in

third person. As a coder, these side conversations were distracting and added a layer of complexity into my analysis. As the original poster, these side conversations might have felt confusing or at worst, dehumanizing, especially when they were negative in nature.

Challenges From a Lack of Connection to Location

Another challenge faced by the OPs is the fact that this group is not bound by a shared location but simply by the identity of motherhood. Although the group was created in the United States, members of the group were international. Though I did not investigate the demographic or details of individual group members, OPs and commentors often included their location in their messages which confirmed members participating in the posts and comments were from a number of different countries all over the world. The international nature of the group did cause some challenges with providing support to one another based on the different laws and types of government assistance in each country. One example of this challenge could be seen in a comment that suggested the OP use their food stamps to purchase diapers. The commentor, who indicated they were from the United Kingdom, did not understand that in the United States (where the OP was from) you can only use food stamps for food. There were also discussions around how the court system and law enforcement work which often included the caveat, "at least that's how it works in [location], where I'm from." The lack of location-based group membership did not stop people from providing support; however, it did appear to add a layer of complication for the OP when reading the comments and determining what real-life actions they should take. As Sipley (2022) had found in their study, having a shared location helped strengthen the type of information and resources Facebook Group Members, including lurkers received from the group.

Following for Information

The topic of lurking was also explored in the literature review, explaining how the number of reactions and comments/replies a post receives does not fully capture the impact of the information shared in the group. Within the Facebook Mom Group, especially one of this size,

there are lurkers who are gathering information and advice by following the original posts and their responses (Holtz et al.,2015; Mansour 2021; Sipley, 2022; Ya'ari et al., 2023). During the content analysis, I noticed two distinct comments that indicated the existence of lurkers on two separate original posts. One commentor simply shared "." in the comments, a way for group members to follow the comments section of a post and ensure they get notifications related to the post on their own account whenever someone new comments. The other commentor stated they didn't have anything to share but were following for advice because they were in a similar situation. Though not traditional lurkers, since they did in fact engage with the posts, these comments do provide some evidence for how the information shared with the original posters, actually support the group as a whole.

Alternative Perspective in Original Posts

While the majority of the posts (93%) were seeking some form of help, three original posts were shared to celebrate the OP leaving their abusive relationship and two posts were shared for general awareness and education about domestic and intimate partner violence. Of the posts seeking help, there was one original post (62A-OP) that stood out from the rest in terms of perspective and the specific scenario described. In the original post, the group member writes about a fight that took place between her and her husband which involved the police being called. The OP shares if she had been given a choice, she would not have pressed charges against her partner. The OP is seeking advice on how she can cooperate as the victim to help her husband get out of jail quickly and not receive any additional jail time after going to court. I have pulled this post out to highlight the variety of perspectives and complexity associated with intimate partner violence – experiencing intimate partner violence does not automatically mean an individual wants to end their relationship, despite what others outside of the situation may think. This mindset was also reflected in 57.1% (N=4) of the original posts coded to "relationship" where the OPs specifically state they would like to stay with their abusive partner and hope their relationship will improve.

The Dangers of "Leave him!"

This perspective is of particular interest when looking at the number one piece of advice shared by commentors: leave! While this may seem like logical and helpful advice on the surface, "statistics outline the reality that the most dangerous time for a survivor/victim is when she leaves the abusive partner; 77 percent of domestic violence-related homicides occur upon separation and there is a 75 percent increase of violence upon separation for at least two years. These valid concerns must be addressed with safety planning" (Battered Women's Support Services, 2020). Out of all the comments shared and the advice given for OPs to leave their partner, only two posts made a specific reference to creating a safety plan.

Of the comments telling the OPs to leave, some group members pressured the OP to leave immediately, "Get out of there NOW!!! Run." or they included judgements like, "why can't you leave him?" and "Get out!! Why are you even still there?". Reflecting on the 208 comments that included advice for the original posters to leave, with only two posts directly sharing the need for a safety plan, there appears to be a gap in public education about the considerations, challenges and dangers of leaving an abusive relationship.

These comments also touch on one of the fears survivors face when accessing formal resources, concerns around what actions will need to be taken, including concerns over being forced to leave their partner (Alaggia et al., 2009; Fugate et al., 2005). The lives of the original posters and their relationships are more complex than can be explained in one whittled down post on a Facebook Mom Group. And though it may be fair to assume that the commentors have the best interests of the OP at heart when they provide advice to leave or write they "would be gone so fast" if they were the OP, it is dangerous advice to share without also providing the necessary support required to safely leave the relationship (if that's even what the OP wants to do). As the Battered Women's Support Services (2020) states, "when women have access to an advocate and the benefits of a women's organization, transition house, or specialized community-based service, they are safer."

High-Risk and Time Sensitive Posts

Of course, all the original posts related to intimate partner violence within the Facebook Mom Group are concerning, however eight of posts included details that indicate the original posters may be at high-risk of danger. Based on the content of the original posts, it is plausible to assume these high-risk posters are using the Facebook Mom Group as their main or only resource for support. See Table 3.0 for high-risk post examples.

Table 3.0

Examples of High-Risk Original Posts Shared

15A-OP	An OP who has left their abusive partner but is struggling to rebuild their life and find support. The OP signs off on the post by saying that they feel like giving up and by using the phrase "ready to check out" which could potentially imply suicidal ideation.
22A-OP	An OP who is pregnant and describes their current partner hitting them and throwing things at them.
27A-OP	An OP who is trying to leave their abusive partner, but the partner is threatening to kill themself if they leave and recently contacted the OP while attempting to kill themself. (In this case the OP did call 911 for assistance but makes no mention of accessing domestic violence support or resources.)
37A-OP	An OP who is in the third trimester of pregnancy and got hit by an object thrown by their current partner. They posted a photo of the bruises on their body and describe the physical pain they are feeling, including potential contractions. The OP asks the group whether she should go to the hospital to get checked out.
39A-OP	An OP whose partner emotionally abuses them, physically abusing them for the first time with a description of the OP being dragged and beaten.

43-OP	An OP who loves her abusive partner and wants to find a way to have a conversation that will improve their relationship. The OP shares a description of emotional, sexual and physical abuse including details like her partner choking her until she passes out. She then includes a list of relationship and parenting questions she would like to ask her partner and would like the group to weigh in on how she should approach the conversation and if there are any questions she may have missed.
48A-OP	An OP who is pregnant and would like to leave her abusive relationship but has nowhere to go. The post is shared with an image showing a blood-stained location in her home, the result of a previous argument with her partner.
55A-OP	An OP who describes paragraphs of emotional abuse she is experiencing from her current partner. The OP does share that she is working with a therapist who recommended she contact a domestic violence support worker however the OP ends her post to the group wondering if her experience can be considered emotional abuse because she feels she deserves it.

These posts indicate potentially escalating violence, individuals with limited resources or strong-tie networks, and situations that may require immediate medical attention. When reflecting on the risks of accessing information and support online as discussed in the literature review (quality of advice, misinformation, unknown sources), it's important to also consider the fact that these posts are not published as soon as the OP hits submit. This means that there may be a significant time delay from when the OP submits their post to the group, to when the administrator or moderator approves the post and publishes it within the group. Then the OP must wait for the responses from group members to come in (if they receive any at all). Tracking this process and timeline was out of scope for this study but highlights one of the concerns related to seeking intimate partner violence support from a Facebook Mom Group. While

previous studies on Facebook Mom Groups tout the benefit of being able to access support and information on-demand at all hours (Archer & Kao, 2021, Mansour, 2021), they fail to take into account the potential approval process timeframe and risk-level of the support and information being requested. Any delay in receiving support or safety planning information could have potentially drastic consequences for the original poster.

Facebook Group Management

On a positive note, the Facebook Mom Group studied clearly has well-trained administrators and moderators who ensured that every original post approved for publishing received at least one comment, often including what appeared to be scripted key messages and links to alternate Facebook Mom Groups within this group's network. This method ensured that all OPs were at least acknowledged and provided with some type of support, even if it was not the support they originally asked for. This is a positive finding of the study; no OPs were left completely on their own after sharing such vulnerable information to a large group of strangers. Administrators and moderators also monitored the comments section and provided warnings and prompts for the OPs to contact them if they needed help (though no OPs ended up tagging the admin team in the data sample). The actions of the moderators and administrators within the group have likely helped build an environment where members feel comfortable coming to the group for input on vulnerable topics.

This adherence to the rules and guidelines of the group also likely impacted the type of support OPs were looking for from the group. One group rule, for example, is that OPs and commentors cannot ask for or offer money or goods to one another. Without this rule, or the active participation of the admin team, we may have seen different results in the type of support requested and the sub-themes of resources asked for and provided.

Discussion Summary

Through the data collection and analysis, we can conclude that the Facebook Mom Group studied has in fact become a safe space for members from different countries around the

world to both seek out and provide support related to past and current experiences of intimate partner violence. While future studies may research the quality of the support and information provided as well as what role Facebook Mom Groups may play in keeping members safe, this study has uncovered some benefits, considerations, challenges and risks of seeking support for intimate partner violence from a Facebook Mom Group.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study provides unique insight into how members of the Facebook Mom Group studied benefit from and utilize a digital weak-tie network to request, receive and provide support related to experiences of intimate partner violence. By using secondary data, this study analyzed and interpreted the organic actions taking place without further burdening the survivors of intimate partner violence or relying on their recollection of past events. Through my own experiences in local Facebook Mom Groups and conducting preliminary research for this paper, I know that these types of posts and responses are not unique to the individual Facebook Mom Group studied. Though the findings of this study cannot be generalized for all Facebook Mom Groups, they do highlight important themes and the need for future research and actions to be taken.

Study Limitations

This research provides a meaningful contribution to the existing literature on Facebook Mom Groups and support seeking experiences in online communities, however it is important to address the limitations of the study. As discussed earlier, based on the research guidelines developed during the ethics approval process, I was unable to find additional Facebook Mom Groups that met the criteria of the study and therefore, the findings could not be triangulated with findings from additional Facebook Mom Groups. Due to the nature of conducting a case study, the findings presented cannot be generalized to other populations. In addition to these limitations, the sample size of 71 original posts is too small to draw more in-depth conclusions and confirm patterns.

When considering the authenticity of the data studied, in terms of the original posters and commentors as well as the content of their posts or comments and replies, there is a chance that some of the profiles or content may not be legitimate. The anonymous nature of the majority of the original posts also means that it is possible the same individual may have posted multiple times within the group. Investigating the legitimacy of each post or profile was outside

of the scope of this study. This limitation mirrors the risks highlighted in the literature review and discussion: anyone can make up a false identity or story and participate in a Facebook Mom Group, either as an original poster or as a commentor.

And finally, as a capstone project, additional coders were not required for the content analysis. Having additional coders in future studies would increase the validity of the findings generated through the qualitative and quantitative content analysis.

Recommendations for Professional Application

This study shows how mothers are using an international Facebook Mom Group as a safe space to look for support and information related to experiences of intimate partner violence. The findings and discussion section highlighted the challenges and concerns of seeking help on such a vulnerable topic within a Facebook Mom Group. Based on the findings, social service agencies supporting women experiencing intimate partner violence should consider Facebook, and Facebook Mom Groups in particular, an essential tool for connecting support and services with survivors.

Using a professional communications lens, the recommendations below explore how social service agencies might apply the findings from this study in a tangible way to further integrate the support and services they offer within the communities they serve. Please note that these recommendations have been made from a communications lens and should be evaluated using a social work perspective before implementation. It should also be noted that these recommendations are not intended to stop individuals from seeking support through Facebook Mom Groups but rather provide survivors with the opportunity to access formal support in a format they are comfortable with, particularly for the higher-risk posts.

Join Facebook Mom Groups and Listen. Search for local Facebook Mom Groups and Facebook Domestic Violence Support Groups. Have members of your organization join these Facebook Groups authentically (must meet the member criteria listed for the group), while following all group guidelines and rules. Monitor these local groups for questions related to

intimate partner violence and domestic violence. Take note of the themes present in both the original posts and the comments section. Identify gaps in public education and create communications and marketing campaigns to address these gaps.

Work with Facebook Mom Group Administrators. After identifying local groups, contact the group administrators and share information about your organization and how you can work together to support group members experiencing intimate partner violence. Based on the level of engagement from the administrators, you could provide them with training on how to respond to original posts and how best to moderate the comments section. You could also create key messages or a Facebook Mom Group digital resource for administrators to share with group members who post about intimate partner violence. You may also explore the possibility of providing outreach services within the group itself.

Use Facebook as a Communications and Marketing Tool. Utilize organic reach from an organizational Facebook Page as well as paid and targeted advertising through Facebook to promote your services to at-risk women in the communities you serve. Create marketing material aimed at bystanders and Facebook Mom Group members that provides key messages focused on how to respond if you see a post about intimate partner violence in a Facebook Group.

Create a Facebook Mom Group. Social service agencies could consider creating their own Facebook Mom Group focused on connecting members with local support, programs and services. Agencies could have this group moderated by qualified staff members and share a link to it within other related Facebook Mom Groups and on related posts (while following group guidelines). This tactic was utilized by the Facebook Mom Group studied using their network of location-based and topic-based groups through administrator and moderator comments on original posts.

Future Research

In addition to the professional application recommendations provided, future research on this topic is needed. Using existing, organic data was a critical aspect of my research methodology and provided a unique exploration into what is happening outside of formal information and support seeking. While this approach was valuable, it cannot describe the lived experience of the individuals who posted seeking support from the group. Future research should focus on the lived experience of the original posters to better understand what it's like from their individual perspective to seek support related to intimate partner violence in a Facebook Mom Group. What was their motivation for posting in the group? What did it feel like to receive all of the comments, replies and reactions? How did they navigate the comments they received and determine which were helpful? At what point in their information and support seeking journey did they post in the Facebook Mom Group? How did the benefits and challenges of posting in the Facebook Mom Group compare to other information and support seeking activities they may have undertaken?

In addition to the lived experience of the original poster, additional research should be conducted on both the commentors, and the comments provided. Gaining more perspective on the commentors themselves could help influence future bystander campaigns and training. What motivates the commentors to engage with the original posts? Are there any patterns or characteristics that could describe the group of people who are most likely to comment? In looking at the comments themselves, it would be beneficial to understand from a social work perspective whether the information and advice shared is helpful or harmful based on current best practices.

Final Summary

Through this study I have illustrated the role of taking a communications approach to explore how Facebook Mom Groups support members experiencing intimate partner violence. The Facebook Mom Group analyzed in this case study is an important communications tool for

connecting survivors of intimate partner violence with advice, emotional support, social-network support, resources, and confirmation of abuse. The findings and discussion uncovered that the majority of group members who posted about intimate partner violence did receive the support they were seeking; however, the quality of that support and the experience of the original poster are unknown. Despite the need for future research, social service-based agencies can benefit from the recommendations in this study to use Facebook Mom Groups and Facebook as a tool to better connect their services with survivors and learn more about the state of public education in their community.

Though I have taken a communications lens to this topic, it is complex and multifaceted. Future interdisciplinary research including communications, social work, and psychology would provide more holistic insights creating robust findings that enable us to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations, experience and outcomes of both seeking support, and providing support for intimate partner violence within a Facebook Mom Group.

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