

Competition or Camaraderie?:
An Investigation of Social Media and Modern Motherhood
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Abstract

When a woman transitions into motherhood she faces an identity shift that can be accompanied with considerable uncertainty. New mothers often experience feelings of vulnerability and social isolation, and turn to online social networks for information and support. Though the correlation between social comparison and online activity has been studied at length, the topic has not been adequately explored in its connection to motherhood. My research aims to use social support theory and social capital theory to understand the relationship between the experience of motherhood and the use of social media, to assess whether the benefits of using social media as a source of support and community outweigh the pressures that social media can exert on parenthood. Using qualitative description, I interviewed a purposefully selected sample of new mothers who are active online and members of motherhood specific social media sites. I probed into their experiences seeking support and information online, and uncovered the issues of time wasting, mommy shaming, and misinformation. Mothers identified that social media placed undue pressure on their mothering ideologies, but was also a medium for fostering camaraderie and commiseration. Moreover, online social networks encompass a sea of information that while helpful, is difficult to wade when seeking child rearing advice. Content analysis revealed that despite the difficulty each participant identified controlling social media use and establishing a healthy relationship with their online activity, they believe it to be a valuable mothering tool and a source of meaningful connection and information. Participants identified various strategies and tools to maintain healthy interaction and balance online, namely tailoring one's friends and followers on social media sites, disengaging with interaction that is perceived as unhealthy or unhelpful, consciously minding and scaling back from time spent online, and exercising care when seeking information from online sources.

Keywords: motherhood, social media, social comparison, social capital, mothering ideologies, transition, mommy shaming

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background

Motherhood has been the most fulfilling, empowering, and challenging journey faced in my life to date. I welcomed my pregnancy with surprise, excitement, and insecurity – feeling hesitant to step into a new life stage for which I was grossly unprepared. Naturally, in the face of such a momentous experience, I turned for advice anywhere I could find it. I asked my mounting list of questions to friends and family, to strangers in web forums, to Google in desperation: “Is it normal to feel this? Can a pregnant woman eat this? How much weight gain is healthy at 7 months pregnant? What kind of breast pump is best?” Questions of necessity quickly became questions of insecurity – the Internet introduced a web of topics that would have never crossed my mind otherwise: Co-sleeping? Nipple shields? Cry it out? Placenta encapsulating? Epidural? Self-soothing? Sleep training? The more I read, the less I knew, and the more unsure I became of my innate maternal abilities.

The controversial, over informed, and often misinformed blogosphere revealed all the ways in which motherhood could be divisive and polarizing. Amid this pressured world, I found it difficult to bring to the surface the bond women should feel around the common goal of raising healthy and happy children. Suddenly, I was sizing up the shape of a nine-month pregnant blogger’s belly on her perfectly toned body. I was admiring the impeccably styled home and flawless makeup of the mother with four children tugging at her skirt. I was feeling pride for my ability to breast feed, and looking down on mothers who “couldn’t get their baby to latch”. I was waist deep in the competitive, comparative, pseudo world that can only be found online. The social media apps on my phone became

my lifeline during sleepless nights in the late stage of pregnancy, and through long feeding sessions at four am in the dreaded “fourth trimester”. While I’ll admit this connection gave me a small flicker of a social life and reminded me that I wasn’t alone, if I am honest with myself, I don’t think they made me a better mother. In the short months that are the newborn phase, I wonder if I spent more time staring into a backlit screen than into my child’s crossed, curious eyes.

Though I had more information than ever, I became even more insecure about my parenting decisions. I felt shame that my newborn had taken a soother in the first week of his life. I was scared to post photos of my baby in his swaddle, for fear of criticism. I broke the “rules” and guiltily laid him on his stomach to sleep in nights of desperation. I lost more of my already dwindling individual identity as I longed for the perfect image of motherhood being presented to me on every corner of the internet. Rarely did I trust myself as a mother to do what was best for me and my baby, whom I had grown and sustained within my vessel for nine months. Though my body knew exactly what my child needed since his conception, I felt that the Internet knew more about my child than I did. Now, over a year into my son’s life, I have shed some of the insecurity that clothed me in my early months of motherhood. I see a dire need for balance in terms of gathering information and support online to take motherhood one messy, tentative, and beautiful step at a time.

As I embarked on researching this topic, I was overwhelmed by the academic community’s unabashed support of social media use within motherhood. Article after article revealed that women find meaningful social support and advice on social media sites, and that the Internet has become a powerful parenting tool. While I do not disagree with these assertions in entirety, they are not reflective of my experience. Instead, I take a

special interest in shedding light on the dark side of social media in the context of motherhood, to understand whether its overall affects are as positive as meets the eye. Is my generation truly better off with this mass amount of information at its fingertips? Does social media use evoke comparison and competitiveness? Can social media produce the meaningful social connection that combats loneliness? Have our innate maternal instincts been swept under the rug as we scrutinize each of our mothering decisions? Though I recognize that every of these questions could never be addressed to their fullest extent within one study, nor will all women agree on the implications of social media on modern motherhood, I strive to glean from my peers a richer understanding of the challenges faced within motherhood and their relationship to social media activity. From this understanding, I will explore the tactics and tools that women can employ to constructively navigate the online landscape of mothering information, social connection, and advice.

1.2. Research Questions

Research supports that motherhood marks a significant transition for women that can be met with an array of overwhelming emotion, often including feelings of vulnerability and social isolation (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, p. 921). Social media has become a commonplace tool for women to navigate this transition, providing a community of support, information, and advice (Valtchanov, Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2016, p. 51). In fact, studies have found that mothers born between 1978 and 1995 in the U.S. spend an average of 17.4 hours per week online (“Digital Women Influencers: Millennial Moms”, 2013, p. 3). Time spent on social media sites can help individuals to feel connected and supported (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, p. 921), but can also contribute to feelings of

comparison, and expose a person to vast amounts of contradictory information. Social media can become a difficult landscape to traverse when choosing what information to trust, which advice to take, and what mothers to interact with. As such, my research aims to address the challenges that social media can inflict on the already difficult transition that is motherhood. I aspire to explore topics like misinformation, comparison, and social capital within motherhood and social media use. Though there is extensive research regarding the topics of social media, social capital, and mothering ideologies independently – these topics have less commonly been studied in congruence. As such, the purpose of this study is to understand the experience of motherhood in connection to social media use. Specifically, my research will address the following questions:

RQ1: How does the use of social media affect the experience of new mothers?

RQ2: Do participants feel the challenges and pressures presented by social media are worth the perceived benefits?

Insight into these questions will begin to unveil the importance of moderation when seeking support and information online, and challenge one's understanding of innate maternal instincts. The idea of genuine connectedness is of interest to this study, and I will expand on the theories of social connectedness and social capital throughout the analysis of participant's personal mothering experiences and accounts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Overview

This project draws on literature surrounding the transformational impact of online social networks on society, then narrowing in on the less sizeable body of research focused specifically on motherhood in its connection to social media. Scholars have long been in debate as to whether social media connections fulfill social needs. Moreover, researchers have identified that some individuals have a disposition to engage in social comparison when seeking social support online, which will be explored at a greater depth in the following sections of this review. As many scholars have noted, there is a call and vacancy for more research to be conducted to better understand the breadth of the topic. This literature review provides a comprehensive overview of several topics within social media and motherhood, to provide a foundation for my research, and is segmented into four main sub topics: 1) social media and its impact on society; 2) modern mothering ideologies; 3) social comparison theory; and 4) studies of social media use by new mothers.

2.2. Search Strategy & Selection Criteria

To gain a thorough understanding of my research topic, I chose to use a selective sampling strategy in “attempts to identify all relevant studies but only within specific limits” (Booth, 2006, p. 424). As such, I sampled specific databases within the University of Alberta library catalogue, and studied sources written in a relevant time frame. Using a matrix of eligibility, I classified the articles I found per their dates, main arguments, and methodology. Depending on the overarching category, the publishing date was a criterion for inclusion in my research. For example, sources pertaining to social media should be

published in the prior ten years, while articles regarding mothering ideologies could span a longer period. The only limits to my searches were that they were to be written in English and academically credible. I favored articles which were culturally relevant to that of North America, though I studied a cross section of international research.

The most useful research databases within this review were Academic Search Complete and SAGE Journals. I used electronic subject searches and citation snowballing to identify relevant sources within these databases. Subject searches were based on keywords related to my four main areas of research: Motherhood, Social Capital, Social Comparison, and Social Media. These umbrella terms covered a range of related key words which I searched in combination to yield the most relevant results. I did not narrow my review based on study methodology, though I found much of the most applicable research was quantitative, which contrasts the qualitative methods used to complete this research project.

To manage the vast amounts of information I found, I employed citation management software called Mendeley to sort sources according to themes and to write annotations drawing on key findings and arguments from each article. Naturally, themes evolved with respect to my research project. Though there is a vast amount of interesting and relevant research regarding new motherhood, social comparison, and social media, there is also considerable room to expand research and fill gaps within the discourse. My capstone project expands on the literature by exploring the social implications of social media use in new motherhood, to glean whether social comparison and intensive mothering ideologies are reinforced on social media, and retract from SNSs potential to provide an isolated demographic with meaningful social support and social capital.

2.3. The Impact of Social Media on Society

Before diving into literature specific to motherhood, it is important to understand the larger narrative about social media's overall impact on society. DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson (2001) give a comprehensive summary of the social implications of the Internet, asserting that it complements patterns of 'offline' behavior, rather than displacing them. Frontiers of the study of technology would argue technological determinism, meaning that technology induces social change (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). The question frequently asked in this tradition is whether virtual communities have the ability to increase social capital and social support.

Robert Putnam (2000), a prominent scholar in the field of social capital, has made many assertions about the community bonds in America throughout history. Recently, he has studied the impact that social media has on the "collapse and renewal" of civic engagement (p. 25). Putnam argues that there are two types of social capital, bridging and bonding, and that "to build bridging social capital requires that we transcend our social and political and professional identities to connect with people unlike ourselves" (p. 411). Though, in theory, the internet is one of the most accessible ways to access a community of people who are different geographically, culturally, and demographically, Putnam notes that often, the internet connects people with shared interests, even if they are separated by space. The scholar agrees that the internet can reinforce rather than supplant face-to-face social networks (p. 411). However, he cautions his audience, pleading:

Let us find ways to ensure that by 2010 Americans will spend less leisure time sitting passively alone in front of glowing screens and more time in active connection with our fellow citizens. Let us foster new forms of electronic

entertainment and communication that reinforce community engagement rather than forestalling it (p. 410).

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam spends several chapters building a case for the impact of online communication on declining levels of social connectedness. He pointedly argues, “The timing of the Internet explosion means that it cannot be causally linked to the crumbling of social connectedness described in previous chapters” (p. 170). Putnam identifies numerous challenges faced online. First, anonymity poses a threat to communication as it occurs online, allowing for more forthright discussion (p. 173); “Less inhibited by social niceties and quicker to resort to extreme language” (p. 176). Second, the dynamics of face to face communication are lost online in the absence of nonverbal cues (p. 175). Third, Putnam coins the term “cyberbalkanisation”, arguing that “the Internet enables us to confine our communication to people who share precisely our interests” (p. 177), which therefore increases homogeneity (p. 178). Putnam concludes that social capital is required to produce effective computer-mediated communication (CMC; p. 177), and only if CMC is coupled with regular, ongoing face-to-face interactions, social capital is achieved (p. 177).

These findings are supported by other research. For example, Sajuria and his colleagues (2015) suggest that online interactions build bonding social capital, bringing together like-minded people (p. 732). This affirms Putnam's description of cyberbalkanisation. As a conclusion, the scholars argue that online interactions can produce a positive interplay between bridging and bonding capital that is necessary to build social capital (Sajuria, VanHeerde-Hudson, Hudson, Dasandi, & Theocharis, 2015). Likewise, other research suggests that social media is no longer a distraction or used

merely for entertainment, but instead it has a "strong bias for interactivity and social connection, which permeates the uses to which it is put" (Quinn, 2016, p. 594). This social connection also has psychological and physical implications. Using the Internet for communication improves social relationships and support, which consequently enhances self-esteem, as well as psychological and physical well-being (Kraut et al., 2002, p. 50).

In recent years, scholars have studied more specifically what aspects of social media attribute to social capital. Burke, Kraut, and Marlow (2011) find that receiving messages, but not sending them, links to increased social capital, and passive consumption has little effect on users with high social skills, but helps those who identify as uncomfortable communicators (p. 579). In a further study, scholars find that directed communication produces social capital, but users who consume high levels of content experience increased loneliness (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010). However, overall, findings confirmed that social network site use correlates with increased social capital (p. 1911).

In contrast, many scholars hold more dystopian views of online communication. Some suggest that time online is largely asocial, competing with face-to-face social time, and its affect depends upon its context (Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2008, p. 215). Researchers in this camp argue that time can be reallocated, not expanded, and internet use at home and at work lowers the amount of time spent face-to-face with family and colleagues, respectively (p. 230). Many scholars compare the Internet to the largely asocial use of the television, but the social interaction provided online cannot be likened to the one-way nature of television (Quan-Haase, Wellman, Witte, & Hampton, 2002, p. 295). Survey findings indicate that social relationships fostered online are weaker than those face-to-face, and that those who use the internet heavily spend less time with their families (Kraut,

et al., 2002). However, the connotations of internet use may depend on personality type, as scholars have found that extroverted people find that Internet use increases community involvement and self-esteem, and experience a decline in loneliness, but the reverse was true for those who identify as introverts (Kraut et al., 2002, p. 67).

One pressing negative affect of social media use is the potential of social networking and internet addiction. A study of Chinese students found that though SNSs provide a medium for entertainment, stress coping, and mood expression, 29% of participants were at risk for problematic use of SNSs (Yu, Wu, & Pesigan, 2016, p. 558). Social networking addiction is of higher risk to those who identify as lonely and with low optimism.

As the internet becomes more sophisticated, it continues to create non-local ties, provide a means to maintain existing ties, and offers up-to-date, broad, and cost-effective information (Quan-Haase et al., 2002). As such, scholars “suggest that the Internet is increasing social capital, civic engagement, and developing a sense of belonging to online community” (p. 319). Beyond social capital, social media is a valuable source of information, allowing interactions to create capital in the way of knowledge (Schrader, 2009, p. 38). However, social media as a source of information goes unregulated, creating a vast pool of information, and few tools to navigate it. Particularly in the case of motherhood, this can pose issues and cause confusion – as I discuss in more detail below.

On the whole, the debate about whether the Internet, and more specifically, social media, positively or negatively impact social connectedness wages on. Scholars make poignant arguments on either side, but the consensus seems to be that if used in moderation, social media can supplement face-to-face interactions, rather than displace them (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Putnam, 2000, p. 411; Baym, 2004). However, like any good

thing, social media use in its excess has the potential to pose a threat to social fulfillment, and ultimately, its social impact depends on the quality of one's online relationships and what they are displacing to allow for time online: "Whether the internet will have positive or negative social impact, however, may depend upon the quality of people's on-line relationships and upon what people give up to spend time on-line" (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001, p. 50). Communications expert, Nancy Baym (2004), finds that face-to-face communication remains the most valuable mode of interaction for college students, despite the prevalence of intense Internet use. However, she asserts that "people will incorporate the internet into their social lives in ways that fulfill their particular social needs" (p. 315). As a summary, the author writes: "Instead of a trade-off between high quality face-to-face conversations and lower quality internet interactions, students are supplementing high quality face-to-face conversations and telephone calls with really good internet interactions" (p. 316). The opinion that online interactions can supplement one's social life denotes that social media is a valuable resource for mothers receiving support and information, and may counteract negative mothering ideologies often reinforced by mass media.

2.4. Modern Mothering Ideologies

A second pillar to wholly understanding the topic of motherhood and social media is gaining a broader outlook of mothering ideologies. These ideologies are perpetuated by media in general, but gain significant momentum online where they are created, shared, debated and so on in social media. Moreover, as a woman's identity evolves within motherhood, new moms often struggle with self-loss and identity transformation (Laney,

Hall, Anderson, & Willingham, 2015, p. 143). As such, scholars generally agree that the transition into motherhood is both formative and vulnerable for many women (Valtchanov et al., 2016, p. 50; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, p. 921), and mothers no longer depend on traditional circles and relationships for advice (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, p. 921). Access to modern media has an impact on the mothering ideology that North American women adopt, and an inability to meet the expectations of specific ideologies can lead to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety (Warner, 2005).

Sharon Hays was a frontier researcher in identifying the cultural contradiction that mothers face when balancing work and home. Hays (1996) argues, "The public ideology of appropriate child rearing has urged mothers to stay at home with their children, thereby ostensibly maintaining consistency in women's nurturing and selfless behavior" (p. 3). She studies in depth the intensive mothering ideology, arguing that "this form of mothering is neither self-evidently natural, nor, in any absolute sense necessary. Instead, it is socially constructed, requiring an unrealistic amount of physical, moral, mental, and emotional energy" (p. 4). Along those same lines, Douglas and Michaels (2005), in the widely popular book, *The Mommy Myth*, coin the term "new momism", meaning: "The insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children" (p. 4). The authors discuss the public vilification of mothers who deter from "new momism", much of which occurs within the media (p. 171). This type of mothering is not beneficial to parents nor their children. Valtchanov and his colleagues (2016) argue that the current constructions of motherhood have destructive consequences for women (p. 62). However,

the connectedness between mothers and technologies blurred public and private spheres, thereby resisting limiting ideologies of motherhood (p. 62). The question remains whether social media reinforces these idealistic ideologies by creating an overload of information and comparison, or rather provides a space for mothers to reach out and seek support and comradery.

Another divisive ideology among mothers is the lifestyle choice that is staying at home with one's children, or choosing to go back to work. Coined "Mommy Wars", the media has framed the two choices to be mutually exclusive and combative, when in fact many mothers spend portions of their motherhood both working and at home (Michaels & Douglas, 2005, p. 204). "Mommy Wars" has expanded to encompass all conflict that occurs regarding childrearing differences, pitting mothers against one another. It is dangerous for many reasons, one being that it only applies to privileged maternal choice, and it drives a "divisive, symbolic wedge, ultimately perpetuating a war against mothers" (Milkie, 2016, p. 51).

Lauren Lang (2008) discusses the concept of the "alpha mom," a title used to describe a "good" mother in contemporary society. Motherhood is viewed as a competition born out of individual achievement (Chae, 2015, p. 509). Impossible ideals are born out of socially and historically constructed motherhood, and to fulfill the role of intensive mothering, women rely on the internet for information (p. 505). Moore and Abetz (2016) build on Hays' research, stating that the perpetuation of the intensive mothering ideology lends to combative mothering, where mothers find themselves frequently in competition with one another.

2.5. Social Comparison

In connection to the competitive and combative mothering ideologies faced by new moms is the issue of social comparison. In recent years, scholars have paid specific attention to studying the phenomena of social comparison, particularly that which occurs online. Abraham Buunk, an expert in the field, and his colleague Frederick Gibbons (2007), explain: "Social comparison is a ubiquitous social phenomenon. Virtually everyone does it from time to time" (p. 16). There are three underlying motives for social comparison, being self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999, p. 129). Certain types of people have a higher tendency to engage in social comparison than others (p. 130). Moreover, upward and downward social comparison influence those with a tendency to compare differently. After exposure to others who are perceived as worse off, self-evaluations are more positive, as opposed to comparison with those who are better off (Buunk, Groothof, & Siero, 2007, p. 198). DeVries and Kuhne (2015) study social comparison as it occurs on Facebook, asserting that Facebook gives off a false impression of the well-being of others, leading to negative social comparison and poor perception of oneself. The researchers assert, "Facebook use may negatively impact youth's well-being by stimulating negative social comparison and fostering negative self-perception, especially among those emerging adults who are already unhappy" (DeVries & Kuhn, 2015, p. 220).

The tendency for comparison to influence one's self-esteem and self-concept appears to depend on personality traits, and whether comparison is upwards or downwards, as mentioned prior (Lee, 2014, p. 253). Authors note that while SNS use can be characterized as useful and entertaining, it can also be stress inducing, causing burnout response (Lim & Yang, 2015, p. 306). Interestingly, age is inversely related to Facebook activity intensity,

and “with increasing age the interest in social comparisons decreases and this decreased interest in turn is related to a lower level of Facebook activity” (Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2016, p. 275). Social comparison is a key motive for the use of Facebook, and the frequency of Facebook use is correlated to one’s likeliness to engage in social comparison (Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2016).

However, social comparison can have an upside, as it is useful for self-evaluation, self-enhancement, and self-improvement (Vogel, Okdie, Eckles, & Franz, 2015). Some scholars argue that individuals can use social media to better understand oneself, and as such, “SNS profiles appear to restore users’ sense of self-worth by reminding them of the important aspects of their lives...” (Toma, 2010, p. 1752). Vogel and his colleagues go further to posit that people use SNSs for making social comparisons (p. 249) and that SNS users tend to present themselves in a favorable light (p. 250), presenting more complex layers to online social comparison. The scholars find that participants high in social comparison orientation (SCO) tend to have lower self-esteem and more negative self-perception than those with low SCO when examining Facebook profiles (p. 253). As such, high-SCO Facebook users are impairing their well-being (p. 254).

It is the consensus that individuals with lower well-being are more susceptible to social comparison (Panger, 2014, p. 2100). This is significant, as there is a high risk of mental health problems like depression among mothers of young children (Mistry, Stevens, Sareen, De Vogli, & Halfon, 2007, p. 1261). Nearly 14% of mothers report not having emotional support for parenting, leading to poor mental health (p. 1263). Moreover, 37% of mothers reported spending too little time with their children (p. 1263). The risk of poor

mental health is high when financial and social parenting stressors are both present, therefore decreasing well-being and raising SCO (p. 1265).

The concept of combative parenting begs that attention be brought to one's inclination to engage in social comparison. Researchers find that mothers frequently engage in comparison with celebrities and that the issue of choosing to be a working mother is particularly associated with competitiveness (Chae, 2015, p. 518). The scholars assert, "The myth of ideal motherhood in the media might repress employed mothers; more realistic role models and advice are needed for employed mothers so that they can balance their work and motherhood" (p. 518). The construction of an ideal mother by media and celebrity discourse creates a standard by which mothers measure themselves, therefore lending to comparison.

2.6. Social Media and Mothering

An understanding of online social capital and support, the tendency for social comparison online, and a knowledge of mothering ideologies build the basis to gaining a well-rounded understanding of social media in its connection to motherhood. Mothers compose a demographic that spends a significant amount of time online. As was mentioned prior, millennial mothers in the U.S. spend an average of 17.4 hours per week online ("Digital Women Influencers: Millennial Moms", 2013, p. 3). The ways that parents use the Internet differs from non-parents - parents are far more likely to look for health information online and to join an online community group (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015, p. 19), and less likely to join a chat room or send and receive instant messages (p. 15). Moreover, 19% of parents believe that the Internet improves the way

they care for their children's health, and 73% say that the Internet helps them learn new things (p. 3). These statistics beg questions about information overload and misinformation, particularly when mothers are seeking medical information online. However, research has uncovered that parents generally consider the Internet to be a valuable information source, not a source of information overload (p. 9).

In terms of the specific types of social media used by mothers, Facebook groups, mommy blogs, and parenting related mobile apps are most frequently used by parents to receive information and support (Holtz et al., 2015). A survey questionnaire revealed that mothers use Facebook primarily for entertainment, social interaction, information sharing, and information seeking (p. 418). Moreover, women value information that is immediate, regular, detailed, entertaining, customized, practical, professional, reassuring, and unbiased (Holtz et al., 2015). In the anxiety provoking early days of parenthood, women find, "Information that they not only accessed from apps and online media but also generated themselves provided a means of taking control again" (Lupton, 2016, p. 8). Overall, the argument is made that there is great importance to online access to information about pregnancy and parenting (Lupton, 2016).

Kakuko Miyata (2008) studies the Internet as an information source for mothers by examining strong and weak ties between mothers, arguing that weak ties "serve as information bridges across clusters of strong ties and can offer people access to resources that are not found in their strong tie relationships" (p. 542). This access to new resources allows mothers to pick and choose the information that best fulfills their needs (p. 544). As such, the Internet "supplements existing real support rather than displaces it for child-raising mothers" (p. 542). Sophia Johnson (2015) argues that as the Internet becomes a

valuable source of health information and support, mothers turn to it as a resource for advice, support, and knowledge.

Consequently, social media and the Internet have revolutionized women's experience of pregnancy and motherhood, providing new means to gather expertise and find social support (Johnson, 2015, p. 247). This virtual social support helps moms cope with the transition to motherhood, and supplements many mother's 'real space' (Madge & O'Connor, 2006, p. 213). Improved social support for new parents has health implications for both the mother and her children, improving maternal health, relationship satisfaction, child outcomes, and parent-child interactions (McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2012, p. 1509). In addition to improving a mother's confidence by allowing her access to information, technology connects mothers and helps preserve and reclaim their identity (Gibson & Hanson, 2013). Surprisingly, scholars find that virtual social support and information gathering in relation to parenting is not subject to the digital divide. Instead, "Lower educational and income levels and living without a partner were factors that increased perceived support for mothers" (Sarkardi & Bremberg, 2005, p. 51).

Social media in motherhood also has links to networked empowerment, allowing mothers to feel more in control of their reality (Ammari & Schoenenbeck, 2015a, p. 2806). More engagement with social media correlates positively with feelings of empowerment as a mother (Holtz, Smock, & Reyes-Gastelum, 2015, p. 419). This might be in part due to the sense of comradery mothers feel and express online. Studies have found that "in many situations women are willing to support one another, provide consciousness-raising as mothers, and offer substantive parenting advice" (Anderson & Grace, 2015, p. 953).

Valtchanov et al. (2016) study the interaction between social media and mothering through the lens of cyberfeminism, affirming that mothers need connections with other mothers, and online connections fulfill that need (p. 64). Scholars point out that the anonymity of the Internet, and its ability to connect heterogeneous women, creates an open and free medium to discuss the intimate details of childbearing and childrearing (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, p. 921). By analyzing the support, criticism, and information on an online “mommy board”, Drentea and MorenCross discover that the website “created an online community which provided the means for instrumental and emotional support”, therefore enhancing social capital (p. 937). Similarly, Holtz, Smock, and Reyes-Gastelum (2015) argue that online support groups are a social support tool, reducing stress and improving overall health (p. 415). They found that the more a new mother engaged with the group, the more social support and empowerment they felt as mothers (p. 419).

Despite the many upsides identified regarding social media in parenting, my research aims to also explore the potential downsides of social media use in its excess in the vulnerable time that is new motherhood. A few experts caution the use of social media in excess as a mothering tool, particularly in regard to gender bias, combative parenting, and seeking medical advice online. As pregnancy apps grow in prevalence as a source of health care information, scholars are wary of misinformation and lack of regulation, asserting: “Smartphones have the potential to take over some aspects of maternity care from healthcare professionals. Therefore, it is important that healthcare professionals and policy-makers are aware of smartphones, apps and the way that they are influencing healthcare and altering health-seeking behavior” (Tripp et al., 2014, p. 67). While this is not

necessarily negative, the sheer mass of information available online can lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

Moreover, there appears to be a stark gender bias on SNS use for parenting, and fathers are far less likely to participate (Sarkardi & Bremberg, 2005). In fact, scholars find that research and media coverage of parents' use of social media tends to focus exclusively on mothers. Interestingly, fathers are more likely to use social media for information to better themselves, whereas mothers are more likely to seek validation of motherhood online (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015b, p. 1912).

Jiyoung Chae's (2015) research has led to the discovery that mothers are more likely to pay attention to information based on the opinions and experiences of peers on parenting websites than experts' advice (p. 505). Moreover, exposure to three types of media—celebrity mom discourse, formal online information, and informal online information—will be positively associated with a mother's SCO and adoption of the intensive motherhood ideology. Her findings suggest, "Comparison with media images and information leads to upward comparison, which entails competition" (p. 518). This inclination to compare and compete as mothers is the basis for the following research, as it creates a worrisome dynamic that could potentially contribute to the insecurity and isolation that new mothers commonly feel.

2.7. Summary

While there is considerable research regarding mothering ideologies and social media's impact on social capital, there is little that bridges the two topics, particularly in the Canadian context. Research tends to support the use of social media to build social

bridges and find social connection. However, few scholars point out the tendency to compare, and in turn compete, when frequenting social media sites. In contemporary North American society, where intensive mothering ideologies already exert significant pressure on new mothers, the element of competition that emerges through social comparison adds complex layers. This complexity contributes to insecurity as a new mother, and a culture of intensive mothering, which is anxiety inducing for parents and fails to foster autonomy among children. My research will help fill the gap between the studies on mothering ideologies and the impact of social media, to gain an overall understanding of the use of social media among mothers.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study will utilize qualitative descriptive research design through a phenomenological frame, based upon individual interviews. Qualitative description generates discovery, insight, and understanding (Merriam, 2009, p. 1) and fosters understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences to construct their worlds, operating under the assumption that reality is socially constructed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 9). Moreover, phenomenology describes the “study of things as they are perceived, without regard for whether they are objectively real, to understand people’s perceptions and experiences and the meanings they give to events and concepts” (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2012, p. 290). Acknowledging the data through the lens of phenomenology, qualitative description is best used when there is little existing research addressing the research problem, giving a surface level description of information and a more exhaustive presentation of findings in themes and categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). My interest is to construct meaning from interviews with various women to describe the overall phenomena of social media use in everyday motherhood, rather than to gather hard data via quantitative methods to attempt to explain the complex social phenomena. As themes and categories emerged from the data, I worked towards crafting “detailed, contextual, holistic portrayals of naturally occurring events and experiences” of mothers and their experience using social media as a parenting tool (Bamberger et al., 2012, p. 293).

Guided by both grounded theory and a social constructivist theoretical orientation, I used interviews to collect data pertaining to my topic of interest. Qualitative research requires a data collection method which can uncover underlying meaning, and is richly

descriptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For this reason, I completed person-to-person, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured, conversational interviews allow for the interviewer to have a guide of questions or issues to explore, but no predetermined wording. In this type of data collection, skills as a researcher are an important factor. It is my responsibility to adapt to interviewees, probe for descriptive information, summarize the material, and process information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). An interview guide was written to aid in this process, which will be discussed in more depth in section 3.4 and can be found in Appendix A.

3.1.1. Theoretical framework

A study's theoretical framework becomes the underlying structure of the research, and provides a basis from which the study begins (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 85). This study is informed by social constructivism—the belief that there is not one single reality, but instead that reality is constructed by meaning and experience (Tracy, 2013). Qualitative inquiry allows for multiple realities to be considered and acknowledged per individual perception and opinion (Mayan, 2009, p. 25), and multiple realities and perceptions quickly became apparent as I began interviewing research participants. Mothers have vastly varying experiences and interpretations of their child bearing and rearing experiences and the impact that social media has had on those experiences. To understand this complex social relationship, grounded theory was used to interpret participants' social constructions and to guide inquiry (Charmaz, 2008). Charmaz describes:

My constructionist approach makes the following assumptions: (1) Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed—but constructed under particular conditions; (2) the

research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the researcher's positionality, as well as that of the research participants; (4) the researcher and researched coconstruct the data—data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it (2008, p. 402).

Together, myself and the participants of the study constructed meaning from their personal, and my own, mothering experiences. These constructions were observed through the lens of the cultural expectation of maternal roles, and as such, both complimented and challenged popular mothering ideologies which were explored in depth in the literature review portion of this report.

3.2. Participants

Thoughtful and appropriate selection of interviewees allows for the most efficient use of the data collection period. To best gain insight and understanding through this study, purposive sampling was used. Patton (2002) describes, “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth...which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 230). To select information-rich samples, selection criteria should define the attributes of a sample required. For my research, interview participants share broad characteristics to ensure that their experience and knowledge will lend to rich data. Purposive sampling suggests that only a small subset of the population will be represented by the research, which creates some limitation to the depth of the study. However, Maria Mayan discusses the concept of deliberately seeking out bias in qualitative research. She asserts, “In qualitative inquiry, there is no such thing as a biased sample. When a phenomenon is unknown (and a

qualitative approach is necessitated), then we sample for the best examples of the phenomenon” (Mayan, 2016, p. 19). As such, I sought to choose mothers who could provide enlightening insight to both the beneficial and destructive aspects of social media use to further my investigation of the topic.

To accomplish this, I employed a typical purposeful sampling strategy that was also based on convenience. To facilitate meeting with mothers face to face, I restricted samples to mothers in British Columbia and Alberta. I posted a Call to Action on Facebook, and after identifying a few key participants who met my selection criteria, I set up meetings in their homes to perform interviews. My desire in choosing a purposive sample for this study was to find women who both understood the pressures of motherhood and social media, and were willing to share about their experiences to provide a glimpse into their world. I found that each chosen participant who comprised the sample was relatable and open, sharing commonalities with my personal mothering experiences.

3.2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Participants in this study include North American mothers (prenatal, postnatal, or adoptive) with one or more children under the age of three who are active on one or more social media site (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) and spend at least two hours online per week. All participants are consenting adults who voluntarily contributed to the research, with the knowledge that they could opt out or withdraw data with no consequence at any point in the study. Participants were also aware that data would be anonymized to a reasonable extent, preventing their identification, so to ensure honest and vulnerable discussion could occur.

Exclusion criteria in this study included any individuals who were not mothers with children under the age of three, and any individuals who are not active on one or more social media site. Participants each also reside in North America, as a matter of convenience and to maintain a level of cultural homogeneity.

3.2.2. Site and recruitment

Prior to the initial stages of recruitment, I received approval for this study from the University of Alberta Board of Ethics. Participants were then recruited on a Facebook Mom's group called "Mommy Musings" in the Greater Vancouver Area, of which I am a member, and have had prior contact with. There are over 3000 Facebook members subscribed to the group. I posted a "Call to Participate" (Appendix B) on the site, and asked individuals to contact myself if they were interested in joining the study. I was surprised and pleased to receive ample response within a short time. Potential participants contacted myself via Facebook messenger. From there, I determined whether they were a fit for the study, and if so, we set up a time to meet for an interview. The interviews took place in the homes of the participants, apart from one interview, which took place over the phone for logistical reasons. A profile of each participant in depth can be found in Section 4.1 of this report. Conversing with mother's in a space that is comfortable and casual created ease of conversation despite the inevitable distraction of children. I found that the participants were very willing to share about their mothering experience, and were eager to give feedback to my questions.

3.3. Research instruments

To maximize data collection to include both focused and emergent information gathering (Bamberger et al., 2012, p. 308), I used semi structured interviews (Appendix A). Experts of evaluative techniques assert the strengths of semi structured interviews: “Interactive conversation may take the focus in highly informative and unanticipated directions, deepening the discussion, adding useful detail, and providing some in-the-moment triangulation as interviewees elaborate, explain, and correct information as it is provided (Bamberger et al., 309). Guiding questions were comprised to initiate and encourage discussion, with the knowledge that the interviewee could direct the conversation as needed and as was appropriate. This type of data collection allows for rich understanding of the topic beyond the confines of expectations and structure, and requires the researcher to act as a moderator to maintain the focus of the discussion. Questions were prefaced with context so that participants understood the intention of the discussion.

The interview was designed to address three main issues: (a) How frequently do mother’s turn to social media, and for what reasons; (b) The perceived challenges and inadequacies that may result from social media use; and (c) The perceived challenges and inadequacies faced as a mother in general. Out of these topics came a discussion on the perceived usefulness of social media, and an assessment by participants of whether the benefits of social media use outweigh the challenges presented by it. The questions were guided by social support theory, which asserts that social relationships benefit health and well-being (Lakey & Cohen, 2000, p. 29). Additionally, the interviews expanded on social capital theory, maintaining that social relationships foster collective action and community building. Within social capital theory, questions explored the phenomena of declining social

capital, and its bidirectional relationship with information technology, as identified by Robert Putnam (2000). My intention was to understand whether meaningful social capital and social support can be established through online interactions, and if the potential social capital and social support garnered online outweighs the challenges that online activity poses on daily life.

3.4. Procedure

After successfully recruiting participants and prior to beginning the evaluation itself, participants signed a consent form (Appendix C) and were given background to the context and purpose of the research. Participants were reminded that their involvement in the research is voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time with no consequence, as well as withdraw any of the content of the interview upon request. They were informed that the interview would be audio recorded and transcribed using anonymized pseudonyms.

My desire was that participants would feel a similar passion to my own in regard to the challenges of motherhood and social media use, so I was careful to preface the discussion with an overview of my experience transitioning into parenthood, and the challenges and benefits that social media has posed upon my overall child rearing experience. By sharing my own experience, I felt that a sense of trust, camaraderie, and honesty had been established.

I began the discussion by asking general questions about each participant's children, to understand the number of and age of children in their care. From there, I asked pointed questions about the type of social media sites they engage on, and the approximate time

spent online weekly. After these demographical questions were explored, I used open ended questions to aid discussion, with a willingness to divert the conversation per what was natural and rich for the mother sharing to capitalize on the information that each interviewee could uniquely provide (Bamberger et al., 2012, 309). Once I felt trust had been established with participants, the “tougher” questions were asked, which could potentially be perceived as more emotionally vulnerable. I used probing questions to dig deeper into themes that the mother expressed interest in, and used prompts when the conversation began to wane. In all, the discussions were between 30 and 45 minutes, until I felt that the topic had been explored appropriately, or saturation was reached.

3.4.1. Shaping the interview guide

The interview script (Appendix A), though merely a guide, was key to facilitating discussion among participants. Each question was designed to garner information that would address the research questions, and fit within the guiding theory of the project. Michael Patton (2002) suggests six types of questions for interviews: Experience and behavior questions, opinions and values questions, feelings questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, background/demographic questions. The wording and design of interview questions was informed by Patton’s framework, to foster rich discussion.

3.4.2. Transcription

I chose to transcribe the interviews myself. Though time consuming, this practice allowed me to become increasingly familiar with the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 133). I wrote verbatim transcripts of each interview, which I then forwarded to the

respective interviewee for approval and feedback. I wanted to ensure that all data was correct, and that participants felt comfortable moving forward. Once the transcription was finalized, I began coding and data analysis.

3.5. Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to describe the results of the study, with the goal of determining explanations for my prior speculations (Mayan, 2009). This type of analysis is substantive, involving the identification of patterns in the data driven by the content of the data to construct interpretations (Bamberger et al., 2012, p. 314). More specifically, I employed thematic analysis to examine the data from both a broad and narrow scope, to identify emergent patterns and themes (p. 315). This process, according to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, involves six steps: Transcribing, reading, and re-reading data; (b) creating initial codes; (c) collating the codes and identifying themes; (d) reviewing themes; (e) naming and defining themes; and lastly (f) finalizing themes and producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this type of analysis, it is important to note that it is very difficult to reduce one's personal bias, and as such, objectivity is unattainable. To combat this, triangulation, validation, and meta-evaluation are crucial (Bamberger et al., 2012, p. 315).

3.5.1. Coding process

I used deductive coding to classify and understand the data collected. Deductive coding draws on the existing theoretical ideas that the researcher has when analyzing the data (Marks & Yardley, 2003, p.57), and involves identify patterns in the data and categorizing content according to those patterns and themes (p. 69). Upon developing a

final set of codes (Appendix D), a coding manual establishing criteria and rationale for coding was created, and subsequent interviews were coded against said manual. Codes were tested for reliability by employing the test-retest method, meaning that when the same codes were applied to the same text, results were reasonably similar (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Themes began to emerge from these codes, and shaped the data analysis process.

3.5.2. Reliability and validity considerations

Though the criteria of reliability and validity within qualitative research differ from that of quantitative research, it remains an important aspect of the study. Traditionally, reliability refers to “the stability and consistency of a researcher, research tool, or method over time” (Tracy, 2013, p. 228). In interpretive research, complete consistency is likely not possible, because even if replicated, social construction transforms a study over time through the aging, learning, and growing of both the researcher and participant (Tracy, 2013, p. 229).

Regardless, internal validity should be considered to establish the congruence of findings with reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research should be rigorous, should provide insights and conclusions that are meaningful and useful, and should take measures to ensure validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Though qualitative research does not require the more traditional understanding of rigor and trustworthiness utilized in quantitative research, important criteria are required to assure that the study is trustworthy and draws meaningful, sensible conclusions. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) describes five strategies that qualitative researchers can use to increase the credibility of their findings, including triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement in data

collection, researcher's position, and peer reviews. Triangulation involves "converging many data points" (Tracy, 2013), and requires the "use of multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to confirm emerging findings" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 244). In this case, multiple sources of data were triangulated by analyzing the insight of various participants with different perspectives. Multiple voices introduced common themes and divergent view points to the study. After interviews were transcribed, and the first draft of the report was completed, respondents gave member checks, meaning they had opportunity to give feedback on preliminary findings to mitigate misinterpretation. As a third strategy to ensure credibility, care was given to provide adequate engagement in data collection, meaning that the number and length of interviews generated sufficient data to reach saturation, and to provide a meaningful understanding of the issue.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Throughout the process of preparing for and performing this study, minor risks and ethical issues which might affect the credibility of the project were identified and considered. A completed University of Alberta Research Ethics Application coupled with signed informed consent forms ensured that procedural rules were held to throughout the process of the research.

In this specific context, I was careful to mitigate the risk of emotional distress that respondents might feel when sharing intimate and vulnerable information about their mothering experience by establishing trust with participants and sharing openly about my own experiences, as well as anonymizing data to remove primary identifiers. Because study

participants were members of my community, and members of a circle of mothers to whom we have many mutual connections, I worked tirelessly to establish mutual respect with interviewees, to maintain each respondent's dignity, and to uncover rich data.

I acknowledge that in this type of research, all data is filtered through my own personal bias. As such, intentionality was required to include data that might contradict my personal views. I sought not to be coercive in questioning, but instead to allow participants to share at their own opinions at their own discretion.

3.7 Summary of Methodology

On a personal level, the topic of social media and motherhood is significant and meaningful. As women become mothers, the value of support, advice, and community is immeasurable. However, the question remains: Can and should this support, advice, and community be found online? My research addresses weighty questions that I ask myself about online social networks regularly, to better understand how social media relates to the experience of motherhood. Choosing appropriate and effective research design was central to meaningful discovery. Though there are different research methodologies and theoretical orientations through which this topic could have been explored, I sought to choose a means to uncover the most in-depth, interesting, and valuable data possible. This area of study is not yet exhausted, and the theories of social capital and social support in connection to the comparative and competitive nature of online networks have not been adequately discussed in the context of motherhood. My research will fill a gap in literature, and provide insight to mothers who are navigating the use of social media as a parenting

resource. The findings of the data collection and analysis can be explored in greater depth in Section 4 of this report.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1. Participant Profile

Participants voluntarily contributed to the research by contacting myself, the researcher, through Facebook Messenger. They were each recruited via a call to participate (Appendix B) from a Facebook mom's group in the Fraser Valley area called Mommy Musings, and were open and eager to share about their mothering experiences. Interviews took place between May 29th and June 1st of 2017 in the homes of the participants. Each interview took between 30 and 45 minutes.

Beyond the exclusion and inclusion criteria noted prior in this report, there were key demographic themes that unintentionally arose among the sample size. For example, each participant had a spouse who shared the child rearing responsibilities, and reported a high level of spousal support. Participants appeared to have stable home lives and relatively strong support systems. Among the participants, Facebook was reported as the most frequented social media site, and all participants expressed difficulty controlling their time spent online, identifying it as a "time waster". One participant likened it to sugar:

Sometimes when I try to cut back I find that... It's like, I'm not going to have any more sugar, and then all you want is sugar. So you say I'm not going to look at Facebook today, and then all day you're like, "I wonder what's happening on Facebook?" It is hard because you're home and you want to connect with your kids..." (Amber, personal communications, June 1, 2017).

It was repeatedly mentioned that moms find themselves scrolling through their phones checking social media sites, even though they feel it is not a productive use of their time. However, despite this, social media was reported as useful for a variety of reasons,

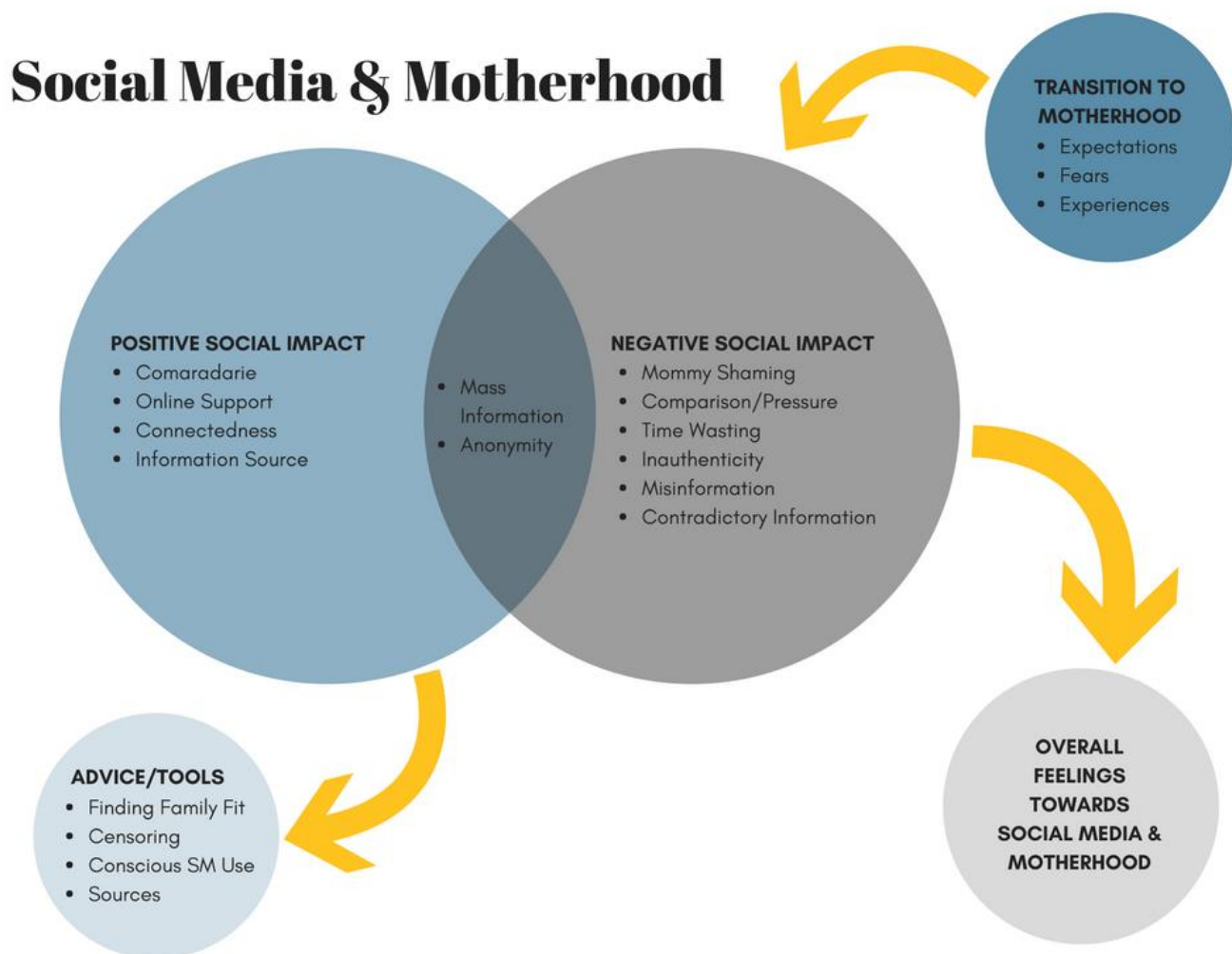
the primary being: social connection, information seeking, and entertainment. The profiles of each participant are broken down in further detail below:

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Work Life</i>	<i>Partner</i>	<i># of Children</i>	<i>Age of Children</i>	<i>Active SM Sites</i>	<i>Daily Time Online</i>	<i>Primary Reason for Use</i>
Amber	Maternity Leave	Spouse	3	3, 2, & 6 mos.	Facebook Instagram	3 hours +	Entertainment
Katie	Stay at Home Mom	Spouse	1	9 mos.	Facebook	Max 1.5 hours	Information, Entertainment
Heather	Part Time	Spouse	1 (pregnant with 2 nd)	2	Facebook, Instagram	1 hour +	Entertainment, Business, Social Connection
Stephanie	Maternity Leave	Spouse	1 (pregnant with 2 nd)	1	Facebook	2 hours +	Information, Social Connection

4.2. Procedure and Coding

Upon completing interviews, I transcribed and reviewed the data thoroughly, coded it per phrases, and then studied codes to determine themes. Each time I observed content suitable to a theme, I highlighted the quote. Themes offered an overall understanding of social media engagement and its usefulness and credibility when applied to motherhood, as well as unearthed advice and strategies noted by participants to navigate social media in a healthy manner.

The interviews concluded with a general question to participants about their overall opinion of the impact social media has had on their mothering experience and identity. Out of this question came several succinct points that bring summary to the overall narrative. The themes that will be discussed at length in the findings section are social media as a source of camaraderie and support, social media as a source of information, and social media as a source of shame, particularly pertaining to the issue of “mommy shaming”. These themes are birthed out of each mother’s personal experience undergoing the transition to motherhood. The following map outlines the categorizing of codes and themes useful to the analysis process:



4.3. Findings on Social Media and Motherhood

4.3.1. Transition to motherhood

Akin to the literature reviewed, the mothers interviewed reported facing the transition to motherhood with apprehension and excitement. Each participant recounted feeling excitement upon discovering they were expecting a child, and the addition was welcomed into their life with joy. However, it was reported that excitement was often coupled with fear of the unknown and insecurity. Katie noted her fear for the health of her baby while pregnant, and found that reading about medical concerns during pregnancy heightened her anxiety (personal communication, May 29, 2017). Another interviewee accounts the difficulty of the transition: “The first six months of my oldest’s life were the hardest six months of my life” (Amber, personal communication, June 1, 2017). Stephanie held a differing interpretation: “It’s way more awesome than I ever thought it was going to be. It makes me mad that we waited so long to have kids because it’s just the greatest” (personal communication, May 31, 2017). Other responses acknowledged early motherhood as a vulnerable time, with a loss of social connection resulting from stepping back from work to take maternity leave. Despite these varying responses, the overwhelming response to motherhood was that while difficult, it is a fulfilling and joyful journey.

4.3.2. Social media as a source of camaraderie and support

Participants echoed one another and affirmed the assertions of scholar Anderson and Grace (2015) and Ammari and Schoenebeck (2015a), reporting that in the face of a

challenging transition, social media serves as a source of camaraderie and support with and from other mothers, lending to increased confidence and improved connectedness as a parent. Participants described:

STEPHANIE: I can't really be on the phone because my kid is doing XYZ but we can send messages back and forth ... That sort of thing ... Or we can't get together because our kids have totally opposite nap schedules but we can talk about things or hash it out and give advice. Yeah, I feel like it's made me feel more connected as a mom to other moms (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

KATIE: [I posted], 'Help, my baby didn't sleep at all. I don't know what to do. Something's wrong with her. I'm not thinking straight.' And just the overwhelming response of support: 'You're not alone, this will pass, you're okay.' That was probably the best post. And there was even a mom who was at my church who I don't know very well at all but who is on [Mommy Musings] who was like, 'Oh actually I've been meaning to touch base with you.' And she ended up bringing me meals. It was almost a portal to reach out to a network that was actually really here (personal communication, May 29, 2017).

STEPHANIE: I think [the benefit is] just like commiserating about the sucky times. Being able to be like, 'Oh yeah here I am at 4 am and my kid's been screaming in my face for 45 minutes and there is nothing I can do. Oh look, somebody else is up, let's talk about how much this sucks and we can just like, you know, be miserable together'. I like that (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

Participants also expressed that social media became a tool to reconnect with old acquaintances:

STEPHANIE: Some of my friends have had kids similar age to Charlie and I feel like we're connecting again on a new level. And so I've made plans with them and got together with them when I haven't seen them in like 8 years. So those connections kind of feel like a new friend even though it's kind of an old, old friend (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

Despite the positive impact social media has on social connectedness, participants acknowledged that they did not feel that online relationships were a good substitute for face to face relationships, aligning with Putnam's (2000) belief that online relationships

can supplement, but not replace those in person connections. Heather and Katie felt skepticism about the authenticity of online relationships:

HEATHER: I've encountered moms on those sites where that is their community and that is where they reach out and that is where they post every day, all the time... But I just can't imagine it being very personal. Especially when it's just a big group with so many responses (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

KATIE: ... I don't think you could ever actually, tangibly replace the quality of face to face relationships [with online relationships]. I would liken it to a dating site. Could you be happy having a relationship with someone that stayed online forever? Could you really take that and transfer it to what a relationship could be (personal communication, May 29, 2017)?

The participants concurred that the insecurity of new motherhood and the many parenting decisions demanded of a mother leads to more intense social media use, and they expressed that they commonly sought information about topics like sleep training, diet, and pregnancy online. Particularly, participants found moms' Facebook groups to be a great source of social connection and support. The interviewees all had in common that they were members of a Facebook mom's group in the Fraser Valley called "Mommy Musings". The group is well moderated by administrators, and controversial topics are banned from discussion to avoid arguments and mommy shaming (Appendix E). Each participant expressed that this type of mom's group has both strengths and weaknesses, but creates a community from which face-to-face connections are made. In connection to the idea of camaraderie, participants expressed a feeling of fulfillment when able to share their own expertise with other mothers, and found that connecting with moms who have been through the stage of child rearing they are facing was helpful.

4.3.3. Social media as a source of information

Beyond the notion of connectedness and social support, social media serves as an important source of information to new mothers. Participants articulated both challenges and benefits that come from the masses of information available online regarding child rearing. It quickly became clear that information in its simplest form is not necessarily neutral. Information can induce undue pressure and confusion, despite one's desire to seek clarity. Regardless of these limitations, participants generally held feelings of favor towards the Information Age, citing it as a positive component of social media and motherhood.

Mothers expressed that when faced with parenting decisions, they typically turn to several different sources, and have difficulty navigating the overload of often contradictory information. However, leaning on mothering groups to hear other women's practical experience was cited as a positive component of social media. Katie described the challenge wading through information and opinions on feeding practices for her son:

Not too long ago ... I was interested in that Baby Led Weaning idea. I read the book on it and I was like, 'Ok, this makes a lot of sense in some ways, but in a couple other ways, I'm really skeptical and it completely contradicts another book that someone recommended to me that seems like a really awesome book that was written by pediatricians ...' Then I was like, 'Okay, now I don't know what to do, let's get some practical feedback on what did you do [asking an online mom's group].' So that was a great way to get a variety of responses, and the majority of people said they did a little bit of both (personal communication, May 29, 2017).

The discussion on information brought up various subthemes, including the fact that information can be spread faster than ever before to the masses, the importance of knowing and trusting sources, the issue of misinformation and information overload, and the phenomena of raising children in the Information Age.

4.3.3.1. *Faster Spread of Information*

A faster spread of information, particularly regarding healthcare, was identified as a positive and important aspect of social media and the information it offers. Stephanie cited the example of measles outbreaks,

... In some aspects I feel like we are getting the most up to date information. Even things like, 'There is a measles outbreak in your area. Here are the things you can do to prevent it.' That information is spread faster and we are more aware about those types of things, which I think is definitely lucky (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

4.3.3.2. *Sources*

Without prompting, each participant acknowledged that discerning the trustworthiness of sources of online information is a challenge when seeking parenting advice. Interviewees discussed the fact that anyone can post online, and that many people are not conscientious of the sites they look to for information. Scientific validity appeared to be of importance to participants, and was frequently mentioned throughout the interviews:

KATIE: ... If you don't know how to look at the source you've got a lot of bad information floating out there ... There's this idea that I'll just Google it and I'll get an answer. You really don't know where you are looking. I'm guilty of it too. I've Googled medical questions for sure but I will read six different sites that I know are reputable and I'll ignore them, and then I'll ask my mom, and then I'll call the nurses line if it's really serious or I'll go to the doctor anyway. I think it's a great piece of the puzzle, but not the only piece (personal communication, May 29, 2017).

AMBER: Anyone can write anything [online]. And if people don't know how to check the studies they link to or discern [what's] the truth or not, it's dangerous. ... [Moms] pick things that agree with their line of view and swear by it like gospel. And that's just incorrect (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

4.3.3.3. Misinformation and information overload

Another issue frequently brought up by interviewees was that of misinformation, or an overload of information that is difficult to sift through. The concepts of misinformation and information overload are not novel or exclusive to the internet, but accessibility to information has expanded and intensified in the Information Age. One interviewee expressed that the masses of information available online actually made her more fearful and insecure:

AMBER: I actually find that social media brings out fears that I didn't have. It makes me aware of scientific studies that I didn't know existed... It makes me hyper aware of the world around me. I think that if I didn't have [social media], I might have more questions that I didn't have answers to but I would feel less judged and less like I'm doing a poor job.

She then expands:

I don't think that it's a plus to be in the Information Age because I think we are bombarded and we don't even know where to go. I think we need to live our life. I mean there are things like vaccinations for example, where there is information to prove they're effective, and then there is information that tries to prove the otherwise. I struggle with the Information Age. I almost want to put that in quotation marks because it's also the Misinformation Age. Because anyone can write anything. And if people don't know how to check the studies they link to or discern the truth or not, it's dangerous (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

Addressing the overload of contradictory information pertaining to soy formula, a topic of importance to her child rearing ideology, Stephanie expressed:

Some websites are like, 'Yeah, soy is the greatest thing, it's got lots of protein, eat lots of it' and others are like, 'No, oh my God. It's the worst if your son is going to eat it he's going to get all of these hormones'. I find that, it's an overload of information and you can't really find what's the truth. How do you get to the bottom of that? ... Anyone can make a website and say what they want to say. It's hard to look for all those sources and make sure it's actually fact. I think that in that aspect I would've

been better if I went straight to the dietician and said, 'Hey I need to talk to an expert' (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

4.3.3.4. Information then and now

When asked whether she felt that the access to information that mothers have now was positive, or if it undermined their instinctual mothering skills, responses were varied.

Heather asserted:

I feel like it's a balance. I feel like there is so much freedom in not being attached to Googling... [But] I think that with like how fast we are learning things in the world, it is important to have access to those things. Even like, learning how kids sleep better. To find programs that help ... There's just so much information that you kind of just get overwhelmed ... There's so much in me that would just want a simple life on a farm in a bush without social media ... Obviously our parents did fine because we are still here. We are alive, we're good. I think there is so much fear mongering with having too much knowledge. So, I think, in that sense, if you use it carefully, wisely... then I think it could be helpful and safe. When it's overused I think it can be dangerous (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

With a more positive perspective, Katie offered:

I think in general I am pro Information Age in the way of I prefer to have all the information and be able to make my own educated decision as opposed to only actually being able to ask one or two people. I also think societally there are really positive things that have come out of this because we're able to distribute information and educate people better in a lot of ways. So, you have seen things like infant mortality rate go down. You have good trends and you are able to try to affect education in some really positive ways (personal communication, May 29, 2017).

Mothers repeatedly used words like “carefully”, “wisely”, and “balance” to describe strategies for information seeking on social media. Overall, the resounding theme was that in moderation, information seeking online is beneficial to the mothering experience.

4.3.4. Social media as a source of shame

In line with my personal struggle with social media as a mother, the issues of pressure and comparison were repeatedly brought up by participants. Interviewees expressed challenges defending their beliefs and facing adverse opinions when it comes to controversial topics reflective of specific mothering ideologies. These conversations can quickly become tense and result in “mommy shaming”, meaning that both advertently and inadvertently, shame was induced from external opinions on one’s mothering philosophy. Though there are endless examples of the types of controversial topics that might provoke feelings of shame or pressure, the participants identified the following as personal to their experience: Veganism, eating organic, Baby Led Weaning, breastfeeding, sleep training, vaccinations, and circumcision. These controversial and intimate topics create a feeling of defensiveness and attack when conversing with those who have differing opinions. Moreover, as was noted in the literature review, intensive mothering ideologies perpetuated by media demand women to be all things to their children - nurturing, inconceivably attentive, and present in their children’s lives, all the while promoting autonomy and independence to avoid being labelled as a “helicopter parent”. As a mother, the pressure to strike the perfect balance among each of these controversial topics and contradictory dogmas can at times feel like too much to bear.

In some cases, participants connected the feeling of pressure and comparison to feelings of insecurity. Scholars identify that those with lower self-esteem and more negative self-perception have a higher tendency to engage in social comparison (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999, p. 130; Lee, 2014, p. 253). In addition, when comparing oneself with someone perceived as better off, self-evaluation is more negative (Buunk, Groothof, & Siero, 2007).

Participants affirmed these assertions by noting that the insecurity one feels when they transition to motherhood impacts the way they engage online:

STEPHANIE: When it comes to babies it's this thing that I've never done before that's the most important job of your life. So of course you're trying to do the best job that you can do, but you don't really have any previous experience or information to go on. It's tough. So you seek out those other people, but sometimes we forget that other people are just people like us. They don't have some secret fountain of information that we don't have access to (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

When asked what issues that most struck a chord with her when brought up online, Amber described:

[Eating] organic and veganism ... We don't eat organic ... I'm a conventional farmer ... That's what I was born and raised in. And people tear down some of these choices and they make me feel judged when I wasn't even looking for judgement. Sometimes I'll read the comments and then I will have to stop myself part way through because I've learned some minds can't be changed. But I also like to put the facts out there and leave it as is. I'm not very good with confrontation, I'd rather avoid it. I find it uncomfortable, especially online, because I'm very poor at managing myself. I just can't handle the mistruth that exists (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

Another participant mentioned the same topic from a different perspective:

STEPHANIE: We're a vegan family. People are not okay with that. So many people... talk to me as if I'm abusing my child because I'm feeding him that way. I don't believe in pain and suffering and murder and torture and I don't want my child to grow up like [that] (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

Other participants mentioned mothering ideologies related to sleep training and feeding as particularly challenging to discuss online:

HEATHER: Babywise is this sleep program that we followed. Worked like a charm. [She was] sleeping like 10 hours by 12 weeks... She was happy because she was sleeping, we were happy because we were sleeping. But, a lot of the times if I were to ever mention it [on a Mom's group] it was like attack right away. Like attack attack: 'Oh you should be feeding on demand, not on a schedule.' And I was like, 'Well, like, she's thriving' (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

Repeatedly, participants identified that when facing confrontation online, they choose to walk away or disengage from the conversation, citing it as “not worth it”:

AMBER: I would read [controversial posts] and get really sweaty. My forehead sweats, my armpits sweat. I get mad, and then have to walk away from it. Because it's not worth fighting sometimes. I'm not getting paid for this, I'd rather go play with the kids and be happy then let this raise my heart rate (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

STEPHANIE: [One time] I was like, 'Oh my god, I have to walk away.' I was on Mommy Musings. Someone was asking about ... formula for a kid who is lactose intolerant. I was saying, 'Oh yeah, we use this soy formula and my son has been happy on it.' Someone was like, 'You can't use that, soy has these hormones and it's bad for kids and adults shouldn't have it and it will cause all these things.' I was like, 'Here's a link to a scientific study to why that's not true. It explains why people think that and why that's wrong.' And she was like, 'I can't believe you would feed your son that, he's going to have all of these female hormones, it's going to mess with his testosterone' (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

4.3.4.1. Anonymity

Participants acknowledged that mommy shaming and online arguments were often a product of the anonymity social media users feel when posting online. Those communicating from behind their computer have little accountability, and participants argued that this allows them to be harsher than they would normally be, with no repercussions. Heather and Katie echoed this allegation:

HEATHER: Sometimes I wonder if it's actually their true self that comes out [when online]. Like maybe who you are really comes out when you are hiding behind a computer or behind a wheel. Like, what makes you want to be that way? Why would you want to treat someone that bad when it's still a person? Just because there is distance between you, it still affects people (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

KATIE: There are times that you would not say [what you say online] to someone's face. That's rude or that's harsh. I mean maybe you would say that to someone's face but you would probably be shamed or told that's rude. The teacher in me is like, if

you said that in my class, I would stop you (personal communication, May 29, 2017).

Stephanie expressed that she tailors what she posts based on the knowledge that when posting online people are typically more candid and harsh:

STEPHANIE: I'm careful who I mention that [we are vegan] to, especially on social media, because I feel like people are behind their computer ... Sitting face to face they probably aren't going to say a bunch of rude stuff to me. But behind their computer, whatever (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

Participants personal findings echo what has been an important topic of study within the field of computer mediated communication, and brings into question the concept of deindividuation, meaning that individuals experience a loss of self-awareness in groups, largely linked to a feeling of anonymity. Gallardo (2017) writes, "While the use of stockades in town squares to shame antisocial behavior is a relic of the past, the use of public shaming techniques has evolved and made a fierce comeback in the digital age" (p. 725). Gallardo argues that online public shaming is a form of norm enforcement. He expands, "One possible explanation for the upswing in online norm enforcement that has resulted in online "outrage culture" is the fact that it provides an opportunity for individuals to passively indicate that they do not endorse certain socially offensive behavior" (p. 727). This type of behavior seems to occur within the mothering community, though the area between what is "socially offensive" or "socially normative" is enormously grey among parenting ideologies.

4.3.4.2. Comparison

While controversial topics were a source of tension and pressure for moms, comparison to another's online portrayal is particularly problematic. This type of

comparison often results in one placing unrealistic mothering expectations upon themselves. Amber acknowledged the pressure to achieve perfection as a mother: “We are all perfectionists, even if we are not perfectionists. I think it’s harmful. I think it’s taking away who parents are as people, kind of putting us all in a box” (personal communication, June 1, 2017). Stephanie reiterates the idea of achieving perfection by describing the pressure she feels when looking at other mom’s photos:

I feel like a lot of people have adorable pictures of their kids. Like all these staged photos ... ‘Look at my kid looking so pretty in front of the Christmas tree.’ We don’t have that at all and I feel like it makes me want that. Like I want that picture-perfect [life]. We don’t really capture photos of that moment. But I feel like it makes me want to be perfect (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

As I’ve experienced myself, this pressure and comparison can easily evolve into jealousy, inducing feelings of inadequacy. Participants acknowledged this as a downside to social media:

AMBER: I see pictures of people with beautiful homes and finishes... And I get like surge of envy, even though it’s stupid. My kids are clean and happy and well-fed. Why do I care what color paint they have or that they have nicer kitchen cabinets than I do? It’s awful. It’s so stupid. But it, for me, it makes me feel like a lesser person because my home is not as beautiful (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

HEATHER: Girls are so prone to comparison, even before they are moms. So whenever I talk to friends who are becoming moms, I’m like, ‘It doesn’t end’. It doesn’t end when you become a mom. You’re still a girl, you’re still prone to it (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

To combat this, Heather explained her strategy:

[With] every post I need to think, ‘What’s the point of this’? ... I also have really high security settings on Instagram and Facebook so I know that whoever wants to view my accounts I have to allow ... I think that kind of helps me filter what I post because people know me in real life (personal communication, June 1, 2017).

Chapter 5: Discussion

The rich data that came out of the interviewees provided a basis for understanding the social impact of social media on motherhood, as well as the merit and the challenges that arise from the Information Age as it manifests itself online. The study's findings reinforced the negative affect that unrealistic mothering ideologies have on new moms, demanding perfection and intensity in an already arduous life stage. These ideologies are both affirmed and disavowed on social media, depending on whom one engages with. As such, social media can attribute to the pressure and comparison that new moms tend to feel, but if used wisely, can also be a source of support and advice when one falls short of said ideologies. As such, social media has the potential to enhance the mothering experience, if used with thoughtfulness and restraint. The interview findings affirmed the belief of scholars that engagement with social media positively correlates with empowerment and social support (Anderson & Grace, 2015; Holtz, Smock, & Reyes-Gastelum, 2015), though acknowledged challenges faced raising children in the Information Age. To navigate this balance, strategies and tools were birthed from the findings to help mothers foster a healthy relationship between motherhood and social media and are explored in more depth throughout this section.

5.1. Recommended Strategies and Tools for New Mothers Navigating SM

Throughout the course of the study, participants frequently made mention of tactics they had personally used to control their social media use and find a healthy balance between reaping the benefits of the connection, support, and information social media

offers, as well as to avoid wasting time, engaging in comparison, or becoming misconstrued by an excess of information. These tactics paired down into four categories: Tailoring friends and followers, disengaging from unhealthy interaction, consciously scaling back social media use, and being mindful of information sources.

5.1.1 Tailoring friends and followers

Participants shared that they found freedom in tailoring the friends that they follow, or those that they allow to follow themselves, online. This not only mitigated the temptation to engage in comparison, but created accountability for personal posting. One mother noted that because she limits her social media profiles to friends and acquaintances, she feels that she is more mindful of what she posts, and her motives for posting (Heather, personal communication, June 1, 2017). She also describes her rationale for unfollowing people on Facebook and Instagram: “I definitely have had to unfollow a lot of people. Because I would be like, ‘Why does it make me feel this way? It’s not okay to feel this way... And I don’t want to feel this way’. So the only result of this is to get it out of my life. I’m just going to easily unfollow you. Out of sight, out of mind”. Another interviewee mentioned that she consciously avoids following mommy bloggers, as she feels they put undue pressure on her parenting (Amber, personal communication, June 1, 2017). Moreover, participants mentioned that they have unfollowed mommy groups that were overtaking their Facebook feed, so that instead of having mass amounts of information bombarding their online accounts, they seek out information when they need it. Altering privacy settings and being selective about who has access to one’s social media profile, as

well as regulating what shows up in one's personal feed allows users to feel they have more control over their social media use and its impact on daily life.

5.1.2. Disengaging from unhealthy interaction

A second tactic for fostering an improved relationship with social media was identified as learning to disengage from discussion once interaction becomes unhealthy or negative. As was discussed prior, controversial topics have the tendency to evoke hostility and shame. When asked how they deal with controversial or hostile online discussions, participants repeatedly stated that they "ignore it" or "walk away". Stephanie made a pointed argument:

For the most part what I've learned ... is people think what they think and they probably aren't going to change their opinion. And if they are, it's probably not because of one comment I make on the Internet. So unless I'm going to be in it for the long haul, what do I care if this person changes their opinion? So, I just try to stay away and not stress (personal communication, May 31, 2017).

Other important themes that arose from the interviews was the importance of acknowledging that different ideologies, tactics, and methods work differently for different families, and refraining from engaging in arguments that could be perceived as futile. Establishing a respect for what works for another mother, rather than responding out of emotion, allows for more censored, productive discussion (Heather, personal communication, June 1, 2017).

5.1.3. Consciously scaling back social media use

Participants expressed difficulty moderating social media use, finding it to be a significant time waster. Tactics can be used to consciously scale back social media use, so

that it becomes complimentary to one's life, but not pivotal to one's life. As was mentioned in the literature review section of this report, some researchers argue that time can be reallocated, but not expanded, so Internet use takes away from face-to-face time with family (Nie, Hillygus, and Erbring, 2008, p. 230). As such, the importance of controlling the time and energy placed towards social media use is significant.

One participant mentioned that following multiple mothering social media sites "overtook" her life, and that the only way she found to combat the comparison that she struggles with when spending time online is to stay away from social media altogether (Amber, personal communication, June 1, 2017). Another mom made a personal rule:

I try not to use my phone for social media when she's awake. So if she's asleep then I'll do my stuff on my social media ... But we kind of made this rule to use our phones just as a camera and a phone while she's awake (Heather, personal communication, June 1, 2017).

This intentional management of time spent using social media can mitigate the risk of it detracting from relationships and negatively impacting the mothering experience. Moreover, understanding in which ways different social media sites affect individuals is of importance. Throughout the study, mothers expressed that they find Facebook to be a source of information, whereas Instagram gives a more tailored look at another's life that more frequently becomes a source of comparison and jealousy. Understanding the benefits and risks of each site, and then taking steps to moderate site use, is beneficial to fostering a balanced online presence.

5.1.4. Minding sources

Lastly, being conscious and selective of what sources one chooses to read, engage with, and take advice from is key to navigating the sea of information online. Interview participants continually brought up the fact that one does not need credentials or expertise to publish online, and that the inability or unwillingness to check the source and studies behind parenting websites is dangerous.

One mom expressed that she is very conscious of checking multiple sources, reading about several approaches, asking the experience of said approaches among moms, and then making an informed decision (Katie, personal communication, May 29, 2017). Katie summarizes the phenomena of seeking information online: “I think it's a great piece of the puzzle, but not the only piece” (personal communication, May 29, 2017). The acknowledgment that there is valuable information online, but that not all of it is necessarily truthful or applicable for your personal situation allows for a more well-rounded approach to mothering in general.

5.2. Advice to New Moms

As a final question to the interview, I asked each participant if they have any advice that they would give to new moms pertaining to the use of social media and the transition to motherhood. This question yielded valuable advice, largely supporting the underlying idea of finding the right child rearing fit for one's self and family, moderating social media use, and acknowledging that no one person has the right parenting answers or methods. Each participant's advice is transcribed verbatim below, and their final thoughts represent

the very heart of this study: Learning as a mother, from other mothers who have walked the road before, how to navigate unfamiliar territory in a season of intense transformation:

I think I would probably tell a mom ... to take what's there and to do what you want with it, but don't swear by it, it's not gospel ... Be sure to determine what's important to you. And to think about science ... For me, I don't know, that's important to me, and I think it should be important to everyone, that we are not following mistruths (Amber, personal communication, June 1, 2017).

I would say find something like Mommy Musings. Find a group that shares your same values. And try to not put too much stock in what other people say ... Follow your instincts. Your gut is going to tell you what to do ... You just need to do what works for you (Stephanie, personal communication, May 31, 2017).

Girls are so prone to comparison... Even before they are moms. So whenever I talk to friends who are becoming moms [I tell them], "It doesn't end". It doesn't end when you become a mom. You're still a girl, you're still prone to it. I just give warnings all the time, to be careful what you are looking at. Even as a doula when I talk with clients, I make sure I know where they are getting their information from ... And even because one mom had experience this way, that's experience. It's not anything foundational. So I think ... rely on your sixth sense. Rely on people who are your friends and not just your social media friends, and having that community outside of it (Heather, personal communication, June 1, 2017).

I mean yeah, if you had asked me this like six years ago you probably would've got a very different answer. I think it's something that has developed over time. I know I used to be a lot more insecure. So, if I had a baby younger I think this could have been a very different conversation. One of my big points would be, try not to do that. Don't look at other people [online], that's the behind the scenes... You don't know what your situation is compared to theirs. You're just getting a snippet. So, it's great for networking, for asking questions, for getting information, for sharing fun things, celebrating those little moments ... Enjoy it for the things that it's good for. And don't use it for the things that it's going to be toxic for. Ignore some of the stuff that is just not going to be helpful for you. So, I think if you're going to use it you do have to be discerning. I think just like with anything else (Katie, personal communication, June 29).

5.3. Limitations and Further Research

A noteworthy challenge faced throughout the course of my research was mitigating my bias so that it was a strength, instead of a narrowing weakness to the study. My pre-existing knowledge and opinions cannot be prevented, as the research ties closely with my personal life. However, to combat this potential limitation, I worked hard to be open in disclosing my connection to the topic. Scholars note that this type of personal bias can in fact enrich one's research, if handled correctly (Mayan, 2009).

Logistical challenges also arose when collecting data. As per the demographic of participants, interviewees had to juggle the demands of motherhood while giving attention to the study. As a mother, myself, I understand the distraction that children can be, and sought to be flexible and considerate. We worked between nap times and snack times to have rich discussion whilst attending to our mothering roles.

As I dug deeper into my research, I become more and more aware and interested in the research topic and social phenomena surrounding the transition to motherhood and its relationship to social media. I had difficulty pairing down the topic to be pointed and concise. Going forward, this research could be continued to uncover more specifics regarding motherhood and social media. Particularly, it would be interesting to study the types of social media sites and types of posts which are most harmful and most helpful to the mothering experience. As was touched on in this report, moms reported that sites like Instagram and Facebook affected them differently. Along those same lines, the study of deindividuation as it occurs among mothers online could shed light on the issues of anonymity and mommy shaming, and be an interesting next step for the research.

Finally, the study scratched the surface of the generational differences between new mothers, and their mothers, and how they received information and support. A more in depth, exploratory study across generations would likely yield interesting data. The generation of mothers today has trouble fathoming motherhood before social media, as it has become so intricately woven into our day to day life. As such, studying previous generations might offer valuable and fascinating perspective. This research is not ready to be put to rest, as it holds promise and opportunity for illuminating discoveries that could aid new mothers as they face the pressure of parenting going forward.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The data gleaned from interviews created an interesting dichotomy. Each participant openly shared the challenges they faced transitioning to motherhood and the undue pressure they felt social media put on their experience as a mom. They frequently mentioned the idea of comparison, and the inadequacy that resulted from evaluating their mothering ideologies against other mothers online. Moreover, each participant recognized that social media was a time waster, and that they struggled to balance and moderate its use so that it remained a positive aspect of their life. They also articulated that it is difficult to navigate the mass amounts of contradictory information online, and that they felt a need to better trust their instincts and understand what fits for their family, rather than relying on online sources.

Despite these challenges, the resounding theme was that with balance, social media remained a positive part of the mothering experience. It's ability to be a source of connection, entertainment, information, and advice outweighs the challenges that it poses. Aside from comments about the negative consequences of certain types of social media use, it appears that each mother found enough value in social media to continue to use it. These findings align with literature, affirming the importance of connection from mother to mother and the value of social media as an information source. So, the discovery begs: Why? Why, despite the challenges and pressures of social media, do we as moms maintain our online profiles and identify it as a generally positive part of their life? Why do we squander time online every day, even after acknowledging we find it a time waster? Why

do we ask the masses parenting questions, when we know that we are not prepared to sift through the mountain of information? Beyond the assertions of participants identifying the benefits of connectedness and information access, I can only speculate. Perhaps as modern mothers, our reliance on social media makes it so we are not sure how motherhood would be possible without it. Though I am quick to voice frustration with social media, and struggle to moderate its use in my life, I find myself logging in every single day. It feels that virtually every mother is active online, and I would be missing out if I were not engaged with the outlet. We at times despise social media, but we can't bear to live without it. It's become a central part of the mothering experience. Within this dichotomy, it is key to maintain strategies and safe guards to assure a healthy relationship between social media, motherhood, and self-esteem, as is expounded in Section 5.

The data produced by this study supports that information technology has a bidirectional relationship with social capital, meaning that it can both hinder and help social collectiveness and community building. Calabrese and Borchert (1996) argue that social networks provide infrastructure that encourage social engagement and social capital. The experience of participants supports this claim, finding online social networks a place to receive support and information, as well as to make both online and face-to-face connections, providing benefit to their overall mothering experience. However, as other scholars have identified, online social networks can have deindividuating effects, meaning that users lose self-awareness in the face of anonymity, giving license to act outside of social norms and engage in online shaming (Gallardo, 2017). On mothering related social media sites where membership is high, barriers to entry are slim, and the topics in discussion are personal and polarizing, shaming is a detrimental side effect. Likewise, the

amount of time participants identified that they “waste” online detracts from face-to-face time spent with family and community, which could lend to a decline in social capital.

Though there is much to be wary of, the data suggests that the perceived benefits of online social networks outweigh the risks, providing a meaningful medium for connection, community, and support - despite the challenges faced by mothers in the age of social media.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

The Dark Side of Social Media and Modern Motherhood

This guide may be modified per relevance to each interviewee, and the direction that respondents take questions. Secondary bullet points indicate probing questions that will be asked to elicit a richer description from respondents, if necessary and applicable. The interview questions are designed to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the use of social media affect the experience of new mothers?

RQ2: Are the challenges and pressures presented by social media worth the identified benefits?

Prior to beginning the interview, I will give an overview of the research problem, questions, and describe the purpose of my research. I will also take time to share my experience of new motherhood considering social media use, so to provide context to my research, and create a sense of trust and comradery among respondents.

Phase 1: Introducing the topic

1. Tell me about your family.
 - How many children do you have? What are their ages?
 - Do you have spousal support as a parent?
 - What types of things do you balance alongside your role as a mother (e.g., work, school, etc.)
2. What does your social media activity look like?
 - What sites are you active on?
 - How much time do you spend online daily?
 - Are you part of any motherhood specific social media sites/groups?
 - For what uses, primarily, do you use social media?

Phase 2: Exploring Social Support & Social Capital

3. What would you say are your main sources of social support and advice as a mother?
4. Give an example, if applicable, of a time that you received support from other mothers online?
 - Were they strangers?
 - How did you get in touch?

5. A renowned scholar in the field of Social Capital, Robert Putnam (2000), makes an argument that though the internet connects a community of people who are different geographically, culturally, and demographically, it can only reinforce, rather than replace face-to-face social networks (p. 411). What are your thoughts about this assertion?
6. In your opinion, has social media use fostered reinforced connection and community engagement among mothers, or forestalled it?
7. Do you have examples of meaningful connections you have created online?

Phase 3: Tough questions regarding the Transition to Motherhood & Social Media

8. When you discovered you were pregnant and began to prepare for parenthood, what were your fears and what were you excited for?
9. Are you finding the transition to motherhood to be a different experience from what you expected?
10. Have there been times where you've felt like social media has exerted pressure on yourself as a mom? If so, what ways?
11. Give me an example of the ways that you feel that social media enhances your experience as a new mom.
12. What are the hot topics that you feel spike the most controversy among mothers?
 - Breastfeeding
 - Co sleeping
 - Cry it Out Method
 - Discipline
 - Product Preferences
 - Birthing Philosophies
13. Suppose you turn to an online mom's group to ask for advice on sleep training, and a mother gives advice you are not comfortable with, or that does not fit your parenting philosophy, how do you anticipate this would make you feel?
14. How do you imagine previous generations received their information pertaining to parenthood?
 - Do you think they were worse or better off, and in what ways?
15. In your opinion, do you feel like social media allows users to hide behind a mask of anonymity and therefore share more harshly/candidly than they might face-to-face?
16. Have you ever been a victim of cyber bullying? Or more simply, an argument online?
 - With strangers or with acquaintances?

Phase 4: Summary and Wrap Up

17. Overall, how do you think social media impacts your life?

18. If you were to give advice to women transitioning into motherhood, what would it be?

- In particular, do you have any advice regarding the healthy navigation of social media use?

Phase 5: Additional Information and Next Steps

19. Is there anything else you would like to add?

- Give explanation of protocol for transcribing interviews, and having transcriptions reviewed for accuracy and feedback.
- Give explanation of data withdrawal.
- Give contact information.

Appendix B: Call to Participate

ARE YOU A NEW MOM?

HAS SOCIAL MEDIA
ENHANCED YOUR
EXPERIENCE OF
MOTHERHOOD?
HAS IT MADE IT MORE
CHALLENGING?

Please join us in a study
into the ways that social
media use affects the
experience of motherhood.

EMAIL
KJARVIS@UALBERTA.CA
FOR DETAILS



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
FACULTY OF EXTENSION

Participation is voluntary, and data will be anonymized.



Appendix C: Information Letter and Consent Form



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA FACULTY OF EXTENSION

Study Title: Social Media in Modern Motherhood

Research Investigator:

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Background

- You are being asked to be in this study because you are a new mother, with a child under the age of 3, who is active on one or more social media outlet. You represent a demographic of particular interest to myself and to this research, as I endeavor to better understand the pressures of social media use on modern motherhood.
- The study results will be used in support of my final capstone project, for completion of my Masters of Arts in Communications and Technology at the University of Alberta. There is no funding backing this project, and findings will not be commercialized.

Purpose

- The purpose of my study is to understand the ways in which social media impacts the experience of new motherhood, and whether it can be used to create meaningful social capital and social support. Specifically, the research aims to answer: How does the use of social media for support and information affect new mothers?
- New mothers often experience feelings of vulnerability and social isolation as they endeavor into one of the most pivotal transitions one could face. As such, women often turn to online social networks for information and support. Though this time spent online can help women to feel connected and supported, it also raises challenges. Social media use can contribute to feelings of comparison, and expose a person to vast amounts of contradictory information. Though the impact of online social networks is continually being studied, little research has been done on the topic in relation to motherhood. Overall, I aim to discover whether the benefits of social media use in motherhood outweigh the challenges that might arise.

Study Procedures

- With the desire to gain meaningful and insightful information, and an interest in understanding how people interpret their experiences to construct their worlds, I will use qualitative description to address my research question.
- Research will be obtained from the personal experience of the author, as well as through semi-structured, conversational interviews. These interviews will be between 30-45 minutes in length, and interviewees will be selected through personal connections, or via online recruitment. We estimate that between 5 and 10 interviews will be conducted in total.
- Typed transcripts will be returned to participants within a month of interview conduction via email for verification and permission. All participants will be granted access to the final project, and will be given the opportunity to review a draft of the report before it is finalized, to confirm that interpretation of the data gathered is accurate.

Benefits

- This study primarily benefits society overall, advancing knowledge of the social media phenomenon and motherhood. However, the potential benefit of the proposed research to the participants is the opportunity to tell their story, and to therefore contribute to research that has the goal to better the understanding of the pressures of social media use and new motherhood. In the long term, my goal is that the coming generation of mothers will enjoy a more emotionally healthy transition to motherhood by having the tools to better navigate social media.
- There are no costs involved in the research, other than your valuable time. Moreover, participants will not receive any compensation for their involvement.

Risk

- There are few foreseeable risks involved in this research. However, participants might find the act of sharing about their experience as mothers and on social media emotionally vulnerable, and may therefore feel minor emotional stress. To mitigate this risk, data will be anonymized to protect participant identity. Moreover, conversation will be guided to alleviate feelings of embarrassment, shame, and discomfort. Participants will also be aware that statements can be retracted and removed from the final project upon request, and that they can withdraw from the study at any time.
- If we learn of anything during the research that may affect your willingness to continue being in the study, we will inform you right away.

Voluntary Participation

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. The participation is completely voluntary. Moreover, you are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if

participating in the study. If you agree to be in the study, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time before the report is finalized, which is estimated to be July 15th. If withdrawal occurs before this date, all relevant data will be destroyed and excused from the final research report.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

- The results of this study will be used exclusively in support of my final capstone project, for completion of my Masters of Arts in Communications and Technology at the University of Alberta. Data will be kept confidential, accessibly only by myself and my research supervisor, Dr. Katy Campbell.
- Data will be kept in a secure place for a minimum of 5 years following completion of research project. Electronic data will be password protected, and when appropriate will be destroyed in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality.
- If participants are interested in receiving a copy of the report of the research findings, they can contact myself via email.

Further Information

- If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Kathlyn Jarvis via email (kjarvis@ualberta.ca) or phone (403-654-7007). Alternatively, participants with questions can contact the research supervisor, Dr. Katy Campbell at katy.campbell@ualberta.ca.
- The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature

Date

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Appendix D: Interview Codes

Anonymity
Sources
Camaraderie
Information age
Mommy shaming
Spousal Support
Time wasting
Online Support/Connection
Misinformation/Mistruth
New Information
Conscious Scaling Back
Advice seeking
Social Impact
Feelings Toward Transition
Expectations
Controversial Topics
Censoring
Pressure
Comparison
Advice giving
Ignore/Step Away
Insecurity
Retrospect
Changing Opinions
Overall Feelings
Tailor Friends List
Authenticity/Inauthenticity
Advice
Instincts
Family fit
Social Media Use
Balance
Fear

Appendix E: “Mommy Musings” Facebook Group Description and Rules

DESCRIPTION

Updated MAY 1/ PLEASE READ! If you're not going to read this WHOLE description, you can't complain about any of our group rules, guidelines or be surprised if you're removed from the page. THIS group is a place for moms to vent in a clean respectful way/share/encourage/cry/laugh/advise/and network with each other . Every mom within Mommy Musings has been added by friends of friends so we are all connected by a mutual source which is nice. Local and long distance, we can encourage each other through the journey of mother hood, the good times and the not so good times! Please avoid shaming others, judging comments, if you don't agree with what someone says, don't answer. If you're offensive, or rude, your comment or post will be deleted and you will likely be deleted from our group. I have a zero tolerance for ignorant, immature behaviour and disrespect of the guidelines I have set out. Watch your language. F bombs , dirty memes will be deleted. I realize we all don't have the same filters, values etc but again - it's my group and I control the content. Keep it PG. If you're wondering if the meme you want to post will get deleted, don't post it. There is to be No Vaccination, Circumcision, Spouse Bashing, or political posts please. Those posts will automatically be deleted. If you need advice on said topics post " Could someone with experience on _____ please PM me". Also, political and religious view points are a tender topic as well which can result in negative responses and hurt feelings. However.... Because I created this page, and allowed you in to my "room" , as I see fit, I will make changes to ensure that what I created stays the way I intended. Saturdays are for Selling/ ISO posts or you can always use the Photo Album designated for selling. Sundays are the days in which I allow people to share their businesses, sales, etc. Please no MLM or direct sales posts on any other day aside from Sunday. However if someone asks for a rep or a product you are allowed to respond with your services but please use direct messaging.