




Online mothers: perspectives of a new motherhood in the social media era

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ABSTRACT

The multiple social changes induced by the implementation and use of social platforms have generated great change within families everywhere. Family relationships, roles, and organization are under going a radical overhaul due to the continuous flow of information and interactions on online platforms. Digitization has contributed to an evident structuring of new family balances, which are framed in a broader socio-cultural process of family differentiation. Social networks have contributed to an unprecedented narrative of the mother figure. Currently, the woman-mother is at the center of the process of constructing a revolutionary image of motherhood. However, this process is not without its criticalities, especially for new mothers who -once they become such - are subjected to the pressure of “perfect motherhood” produced and evoked through content of all kinds - especially videos and posts - published by other mothers or experts. Italian moms turn out to be increasingly prone to postpartum depression and marital (or cohabitation) crises, and they find in social networks a place of escape and confrontation.

This article aims to thoroughly investigate the effects of social media on mothers' psychological well-being, including levels of stress, anxiety and depression. Using monitoring online interactions on blogs, forums and mothers' groups in social platforms as the main method, the essay explores the relationship between postmodern mothers' use of social media and their family organization. In addition, this analytical research method explores the risks to mothers' mental health from the exposure of toxic patterns of motherhood on social. The final goal of the paper is to study a prevention plan that provides mothers - as early as pregnancy - with all the cognitive tools useful for a conscious consumption of social networks and related media content.

Keywords: motherhood; social media; online support; mothers; psychophysical well-being.

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Introduction

Motherhood is one of the most complex and delicate phases in a woman's life. If throughout history becoming a mother meant actualizing a socially imposed duty, in today's era motherhood is, for the most part in Italy, a free choice. Certainly, even more conscious since the 1960s, with the rejection of motherhood as destiny, as nature; the rejection of the motherhood-duty and the maternal and domestic models of previous generations (Bydlowski, 2004). However, this privileged condition of women's freedom has paradoxically generated unprecedented difficulties.

If from women's emancipation one would have expected a more equal distribution between men and women of the management burden of the home and children, what is instead found in practice is an opposite effect of multiplication of responsibilities.

Mothers see their time committed to daily acrobatics between work, home and child management, while very often the tasks of fathers in the postmodern era do not seem, on the other hand, to differ much from those of fathers of earlier generations. Adding to the overstimulation of modern mothers, pressed by hectic schedules, is the absence of a real network of practical and moral support for motherhood, which was present in greater proportion in pre-digital eras.

The sum of these factors has as its inevitable consequence the increasing exposure of postmodern mothers to the risk of postnatal depression and relationship crises with their partners: these risks are identified as “purely ‘liquid-modern’ ills, in the same way as anorexia, bulimia and countless forms of allergy” (Bauman, 2006). They are, that is, frailties related to the modern context in which we move.

The sense of isolation, already widespread and clearly visible in society as a profound effect of the advent of new technologies and online social networking, adds to the forms of psychological malaise experienced by mothers who are abandoned in the lonely management of a disproportionate number of responsibilities related to the multiple roles they play in society.

While, however, as Mazzucchelli states, social networking breeds loneliness, it is also true that the same can determine itself as an antidote to the loneliness of the postmodern mother. In fact, network loneliness takes the form of being alone and at the same time with others (Mazzucchelli, 2014), and from this being together, connected, mothers derive postnatal benefits. By externalizing doubts, fears and moods online, they lighten their own mental and emotional load, relieving psychosomatic symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression.

The blatant evidence of such benefits explains the sharp increase in Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp groups of women sharing the experience of pregnancy and motherhood with peers. Online sharing of “mom-to-mom” experiences and advice crystallizes across a boundless variety of topics, from breastfeeding to weaning, from choosing a pediatrician to managing family time. The virtual network of peer support thus finds itself reinforcing, and sometimes replacing, the real one of family and friends. All it takes is a smartphone and a wi-fi connection for today's mom to feel heard, comforted, reassured.



Psychological support platforms for mothers suffering from postpartum depression, or simply in need of a listening ear, consolidate this network of virtual support for an increasingly vulnerable and troubled motherhood. The mamasphere, the world of online motherhood, is more complex than one imagines, however.

Constructing and conveying models of “perfect” motherhood, which have little or no adherence to the motherhood experienced in the real world, exposes online mamas to some extremely topical risks. Comparison with other moms and consumption of content posted by influencers on virtual platforms sometimes generates feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and frustration.

The mamasphere, with its large number of mommy bloggers, has a decisive influence on the psyche of mothers: it conditions the way they educate and care for their children, affects their lifestyle and sometimes even their purchases of baby and household products. From whichever point of view one analyzes the social sphere of moms, there is no doubt that new technologies have intercepted and ridden on the needs of modern moms, succeeding in filling gaps and facilitating everyday life, both in terms of speed and availability of information and the practical management of everyday family life (Nonis, 2013).

The aim of the paper is to identify the potential risks to maternal well-being arising from the virtual window dressing of one's maternal experience, as well as from uncontrolled exposure to harmful models of motherhood circulating on social networks.



Materials and Methods

In conducting the research, direct analysis of interactions on social networks and forums proved extremely useful. Two of the most clicked and well-known forums in the online women's community (*alfemminile.com* and *gravidanzaonline.com*) were selected for the study of interactions between mothers and pregnant women. These were subjected to constant and direct monitoring for a total duration of three months. With regard to peer support on social platforms, the Facebook groups “*Mamme e future mamme*”, “*MammeDiMerda*”, “*I consigli delle mamme*”, “*Doniamo Mamme*”, and “*Mamme che donano*” were observed with equal consistency and duration. The sampling process was done by deliberately taking into account the diverse nature and purposes of the mothers' groups in order to explore the heterogeneity of the narratives of motherhood in the virtual. For the study of motherhood narratives on the web, on the other hand, content published on the well-known blogs *PianetaMamma.it* and *Stancamentemamma.com* were subjected to analysis.

It was possible to deepen the study of the online diffusion of maternity models thanks to the analysis of the social profiles of four Italian momfluencers with a following of more than 500 thousand followers: Julia Elle (*disperamentemamma*), Vanessa Padovani (*miss_mamma_sorriso*), Clarissa Marchese (*clarissa-marchese*) and Eleonora Valli (*vallieleonora*).

Finally, by directly following the Whatsapp chats created by the “*Mamme e future mamme*” community, subdivided by topic, an accurate understanding of the dynamics of information exchange between peers, but also between mothers and expert counselors (nutritionists, pedagogists, psychologists, and sleep counselors) was achieved.

Results

From the analysis of social networking by Italian moms of heterogeneous age and regional background, the threefold function of virtual platforms can be deduced. In first place is the informational function. It is found, in fact, with the observation of online communities of mothers, that a relevant proportion of women use virtual platforms mainly for informational purposes: so many mothers choose to follow the social profiles of maternity and childcare specialists to dispel doubts and concerns.

The second type of use is for the purpose of practical and emotional support: on social networks, mothers (and new mothers) ask for and find peer support, not only emotional but also practical. From the observations made, it is found that mothers in the digital media era express themselves in places where they feel represented, where they can narrate themselves and open to a “you” that is always female (Cossetta, 2017).

There are many topics in the *alfemminile.it* forum, and they are divided into categories to simplify access to the discussion relevant to the interests of the mom browsing the site.

Looking at the individual discussions, it is clear that moms are not only looking for practical advice (such as how to organize their day with a newborn or what kind of milk to give) but also use the forums as a means to lighten their emotional load by sharing their stories and problems. Forums such as *alfemminile.it* and *pregnancyonline.com* offer the possibility of maintaining anonymity by using a fictional username.



The same happens in Facebook groups, within which each mom can express herself and share problems and fears while preserving privacy. The absolute most followed topic by women on the *alfemminile.it* forum is pregnancy: in fact, the Pregnancy category has almost 2 million discussions. It is followed in second place by the Relationships category (784 thousand discussions) and Newborn (743 thousand discussions). Another element that emerged from this research, is the massive interest of the women's community in topics related to mental well-being: the tag *#health* is among the top five most popular tags in the forum. Also in the *pregnancyonline.com* forum, pre and postpartum wellness is at the top of the most clicked topics, with 2 thousand discussions and 36 thousand posts. Consistent with the statistical data collected on *alfemminile.it*, the trend on *gravidanzaonline.com* also shows a preference of registered women for pregnancy-related topics. To be more precise, the topic “9 months of plans and dreams” has 3600 topics and over 86 thousand posts and is the most clicked on forum. As for practical support, again social networks play an essential role. In Facebook groups such as “Let's Donate Moms” or “Donating Moms,” moms donate each other's games, necessities to needy moms in the area of reference, thus creating a virtuous and supportive circle of exchange and recycling. The third and final type of fruition, is that of sharing. So many women choose to narrate and share, for a multitude of different reasons, their motherhood with the online community since gestation.

Discussion

Like any other social institution, the family is currently at the center of major socio-cultural changes, due in large part to the advent of new technologies and social platforms. As Aroldi explains, more and more families are using social networks to cope with the increasing complexities and dispersions of family life (Aroldi, 2015), allowing members to remain in constant connection even at a distance and maintaining an active sense of closeness. The digital age has radically revolutionized the concept of family, family relationships and collaterally that of parenting as well. In this changing context, the condition of motherhood represented by social media deserves special attention. Considered one of the most delicate and complex phases of a woman's life, modern motherhood has acquired new forms and expressions with the advent of new technologies. The development of motherhood, not only physical, but also the development of an inner motherhood (Mori, 2022), no longer takes place only in the rooms of listening centers, in the offices of psychologists and gynecologists, but also finds expression on social networks and forums on the web dedicated to pregnancy and motherhood.

That on the virtual platforms, is an ambivalent narrative of modern-day motherhood, which is delineated through the opposition between two main models: that of the perfect mother (impeccable, well-groomed in appearance, punctual and careful in the management of the family, house always clean and tidy, etc.) and that of the imperfect mother (marked by fatigue and stress, at times distracted and superficial, inconstant, a house in perpetual disorder, etc.). In order to analyze the direct and indirect effects of social networking on postmodern mothers and their lifestyles, it is deemed useful to start from the reasons for the need for connectivity that they share.



One, undoubtedly, is the sense of loneliness: an increasingly common feeling among citizens of a globalized and individualized society. In the current condition of the postmodern mother, this feeling is amplified by the fragility-or, in some cases, the total absence-of a support network, both practical and emotional. Added to this is the increased levels of anxiety and stress associated in many cases with a poor distribution of the mental load and responsibilities of family management. These just mentioned, represent just some of the most common causes of risk for postpartum depression and marital crises. The risk of postpartum depression increases with events such as bereavement, separation, job loss, and relationship conflicts (Anrò, 2023). The likelihood of falling into these “liquid ills,” as Bauman calls them (Bauman, 2003), is greater in a liquid society based on frenetic rhythms and relational precariousness. A recent ISTISAN report of a survey on perinatal mental health, conducted on a sample of 4884 women between November 2021 and November 2022, nearly a quarter of the sample (24.5 percent) scored at or above 9 on the Depression Risk Screening Test (EPDS). But that's not all: 1.3 percent reported using psychotropic drugs for depression, anxiety or other psychological problems. Sharing motherhood with the online community, from the pre-gestational phase to the perinatal phase and beyond, introduces women into a feminine network, which generates a sense of belonging and opportunities for peer-to-peer and direct confrontation (Verri, 2016). Anxiety, anger, frustration and other negative feelings seem to fade as more mothers find themselves sharing, online or offline, their malaise in an empathetic and nonjudgmental manner.

Alba Marcoli has pondered the topic quite a bit, working with groups of emotionally distressed mothers. In the text “The Anger of Moms” (Marcoli, 2011), the clinical psychologist intuits the importance of this sharing in revolutionizing, in small steps, the inner state of mothers. In this context it is possible to frame the profound reason why more and more mothers manage to find in cyberspace a comfort-zone, a place of safety, salvation and protection from excessive external stimuli. The network and social networks are tools of narrative and self-representation, as well as a source of dissemination and information (Locatelli, Sampietro). Solidarity among mothers thus finds space in the virtual world, sometimes in greater quantities than in the real world. The virtual network of support for motherhood strengthens and complements - in some cases replaces altogether - the network of relatives and friends, which is showing itself to be increasingly fragile and sometimes inadequate to the maternal needs typical of a liquid society. The value of social networks lies, in this sense, in the ability to create bonds of solidarity between mothers belonging to any part of the globe, any culture, resetting distances and absences, mutually relieving the burden of sadness and loneliness. With the advent of new technologies, no mother is alone anymore.

But as Kate Orton-Johnson points out in her essay “Mommy Blogs and Reading Mothering,” social networks represent not only a place where contemporary motherhood finds consolation and support. In the mamasphere, the maternal identity is in constant negotiation between the need to express the most authentic Self and the need to come as close as possible to the model of the perfect mom popularized by momfluencers. It is quite common to come across reels on Instagram or TikTok in which a mom in perfect physical shape shows the strictly home-made snack of her designer and smiling children, against the background of a perfectly neat and tidy house.



The more immediate effects of this apparent maternal perfection are reflected in feelings of frustration and inadequacy in the mother who lacks the proper tools to filter out this media content packaged specifically for the target audience she represents. The effects, on the other hand, in the long run, can be so extreme as to compromise the mother's relationship with herself and her family. The risk of succumbing to the beguiling promises of the online world, with its entire menu of distractions (Turkle, 2016), is always just around the corner, resulting in the devaluation of the preciousness of moments of boredom and solitude, as well as family dialogue.

The undisputed protagonists of the spread of new perspectives of the mother figure on social platforms are momfluencers. Momfluencers are key-figures of the mamasphere: they monetize their identity as mothers on social media (Petersen, 2023) by instagramming, posting and advertising products and services.

A dual narrative of motherhood can also be found in the social activity of momfluencers: some of them choose to show the authentic side of being a mother today, with all the difficulties and problems that come with it; many others, on the other hand, strive to construct and post a perfectionist and ultra-positive reality that leaves no room for smears and mistakes. If many well-known female faces, not only of daughters of online success but also of women belonging to the world of entertainment or sports, choose to show - and post - the best part of being a mother, just as many celebrities and influencers espouse the rejection of this glossy and ultra-positive model of motherhood, showing on their social profiles the vulnerability of the maternal condition, the crucial aspects of accepting an imperfect body, marked by fatigue and missed sleep.

A few months after giving birth, Federica Pellegrini posts a photo in which she shows her physique still marked by pregnancy: a photo that communicates a clear message to mamasphere, that of accepting oneself, of living the events of motherhood in their absolute normality without giving in to the allure of an insubstantial and nonexistent perfection to chase. This dimension of the mamasphere proudly shows stretch marks and C-section scars, teaches the normality of mistakes and bad days, opposing the utopian paradigm of the "super-mom" constructed and conveyed by social networks. It is a narrative of a more realistic, real motherhood, one that does not omit the problematic aspects, the doubts, the worries, the feelings of sadness and overwhelm from everyday life. As Lopez well explains, the public representation in blogs of the pregnant body, of postpartum depression, of the difficulty of reconciling private life and work, takes the form of a power grab over traditional forms of representation of female identity (Lopez, 2009).

One of the virtual spaces that uses this mode of online narrative of motherhood today is the blog Mammadimerda (MdM). Aiming to create a communicative space that accounts for the unspoken difficulties of motherhood, MdM stands as an example of a pedagogical counterculture that challenges common sense (Cino, 2020). The blog, with its related Facebook group, takes the form of a virtual space in which mothers can express themselves in their authenticity, without the fear of receiving judgment or advice on parenting. Adding to these two opposing perspectives of motherhood offered by social media is a third dimension regarding the online mothering community: that of scientific disclosure.



In fact, in the survey conducted during this study, on a sample of 30 Italian mothers of different age groups, a high percentage of mothers who use social networks also follow social channels of professionals from various scientific areas - pediatricians, pedagogists, speech therapists, etc. - to acquire information and notions useful for the management and care of their children. This dimension is characterized by its own informational objective, without claiming to aim at the construction or (de-)construction of a certain image of motherhood, rather it focuses on the communicative ability of that part of the scientific community that chooses to invest resources on the online dissemination of scientific content regarding their discipline of expertise. There are quite a few child and maternity professionals who, in recent years, have built and retained a community of hundreds of thousands of followers, through simplified and accessible language that aims at structuring an informed, up-to-date and knowledgeable mother, free from old patterns, traditional methods and false beliefs handed down by previous generations of mothers (who at the time did not have today's technologies with related access to thousands of information). Through reels and posts, the online community of mothers - and parents, more generally - becomes self-taught and acquires notions directly from professionals on everything related to childcare. Scientific information in the mamasphere finds quite a lot of success because it manages to capture the information needs of mothers by providing simple, relevant and immediate answers. Many of these professionals choose to schedule one or more weekly live shows to address parents' concerns in real time. Each live includes a direct dialogue with parents interested in the proposed topic (e.g., child safety in the car), and sometimes more than one expert may intervene in the same live (e.g., a pediatrician and a speech therapist schedule a live to answer parents' questions about the milestones of child language development). Pediatrician Claudio Olivieri, better known as "the doc," has 579,000 followers on his social accounts and is one of the best-known pediatricians in the online community.

With his reels on Instagram and TikTok, he "takes apart" false information about children's health and care with a clear and often humorous communication style. This further demonstrates that social media have become highly important channels in learning processes (Taddeo, 2024). From what has been examined so far, we can infer the complexity of the relationship between postmodern motherhood and social networks, made up of opposing narratives of motherhood and informational spaces; of peer interactions and superficial judgments; of solidarity and at the same time clashes. Conflict also presents itself as a rather common dynamic of mommy blogging since at the same time the new technologies, yes they strengthen communications and promote access to knowledge but on the other hand it is also true that sometimes these same technologies can lend themselves to the dissemination of hurtful, violent content or, even, to inciting hatred (Campagnoli, 2020). Discussions on some virtual spaces dedicated to mothers, such as Whatsapp, Telegram, and Facebook groups are moderated by third parties: this process of moderation of interactional exchanges proves essential in its functions in an era in which we are witnessing a highly individualized and ego-centric logic of communicative processes in which the sharing of values as a function of achieving shared social goals appears weakened (Pira, 2021).

We live "hybrid" existences between the virtual and the real: because of this, what happens in an online mom's virtual interactions has inevitable effects on her real life as well - for better or for worse - since as we create our technologies, so they create and shape us (Turkle, 2016).



The sharing of experiences, beliefs and values among mothers can generate - in addition to conflicting dynamics - expectations about themselves and their children, by virtue of a process of comparison between their own children and those of other users with whom they are in contact. The online and offline dimensions thus intersect in a circular relationship (Paccagnella, 2016), in which postmodern motherhood is narrated, posted, and revisited by the multitude of online voices, momfluencers, newly registered moms on forums, and generations of moms compared on social platforms. The study conducted, compared to the contributions to date, sought to highlight every possible form of relationship between new technologies, social platforms, and postmodern moms in Western society. Looking at the many narratives of motherhood found online, the contribution puts the relationship between maternal well-being and the use of social networks under the magnifying glass for the first time.

The same reinforces and urges the need for preventive intervention to limit all the risks described in this research.

Conclusion

In the awareness of all the changes that have occurred in the maternal sphere in the last two decades, it is not enough to take note of the responsibilities of social media on maternal well-being. In a context where 70% of online moms in Italy are confronted with momfluencers, there is a priority to think about possible forms of prevention of those mechanisms that make them subjugated by new media logics and negative parenting styles. To make them aware and informed about the media processes of construction and transmission of models and content related to parenting, one of the solutions could be to introduce in the pre-natal courses an informative section dedicated to the potential and risks for mothers-to-be related to the use of social apps and the web. This preventive action aimed at women entering the world of this prismatic postmodern motherhood, allows them to understand at what level the virtual is able to shape everyday life by penetrating and creating the mapping of our lives and social relationships (Lovink, 2012). Suitable and comprehensive (in)education supports the new mother by providing her with the appropriate critical tools to identify virtual places of support and solidarity, without excluding potential patterns circulating online that are harmful to her own well-being.

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