On Raising Parents: The Virtual Village as Pandemic Problem or Pal.

A study of the experience of Ontario parents with digital community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Capstone

Submitted by: Paris Semansky

March 15, 2024

Instructor: Terry Flynn

Course: COMMGMT 740 (Summer 2023)

Department of Communications Studies and Media Arts

Faculty of Humanities

McMaster University

Abstract

This study investigates how Ontario parents with young children used social media as a form of digital community during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the dual potential of social platforms to be sources of support and stress. It explores the complex role of social media in creating community support and social capital acquisition for parents, who faced increased care responsibilities and parenting pressures due to the pandemic. The research aims to understand parents' perceptions of support across social media platforms, considering demographic factors such as income, racial identity, and work-from-home status as reflected in responses to a survey of over 260 Ontario parents. The findings contribute to the understanding of digital community dynamics, offering insights into the benefits and challenges of online support groups for pandemic parenting.

Keywords: digital community, pandemic parenting, social capital, online support groups, social media and parenting, COVID-19 and family well-being

Table of contents

On Raising Parents: The Virtual Village as Pandemic Problem or Pal

Introduction

"The pandemic is breaking parents," warned a headline in Maclean's magazine in November 2021 (Proudfoot). The Atlantic alerted, "COVID parenting has passed the point of absurdity," (Wenner Moyer, 2022). Within the first year of the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, the New York Times was advertising a hotline for parents – not to talk or share stories, but to scream: "Are you a parent who is tired as hell?" the landing page asked. "Click the number to scream after the beep" (2020). In 2021 and 2022, there were reports of groups of mothers gathering in public places like football fields to scream in person (Lakput, 2022). In addition to media conversation, emerging academic literature confirms these trends, with surveys and studies finding negative impacts on parenting practices and levels of parental burnout

(Griffith et al., 2022; Almeida et al., 2020; Adams et al., 2021).

Isolated parents often turned to social media and digital communities for information and support during the pandemic (Hooper et al., 2022, Hooper et al., 2023, Drouin et al., 2020). The scholarship is mixed on the impact of social media use overall and for parents specifically. For some parents, social media provides support and creates a digital community, and for others, it further exacerbates feelings of stress, anxiety, and comparison (Hooper et al, 2023; Drouin et al, 2020). In a book-length essay exploring ideas and definitions of community, Ontario author Casey Plett argues that,

> Digital spaces are often derided as leading to the breakdown of society, but they too are conveyors of community…It can mean something. Sometimes it means ugly things, of course. But I'm not always

> sure we recognize the nourishing parts of these digital spaces (2023, p. 112).

Social media use is often discussed in a binary: derided for its negative impacts or celebrated for its potential to bring people together. What if social media, particularly for parents of young children, is both a blessing and curse—a complex space where contradictory experiences coexist?

This research seeks to better understand this contradiction through the experiences of a group of parents who used social media during the pandemic. Based on their reported use of social media over the first two years of the pandemic – March 2020 to March 2022 – this research endeavors to understand how parents of children aged 10 and under used various social media platforms and their perceived level of support from that use. The COVID-19 global pandemic provides a useful frame for inquiry given the ubiquity and increase in the use of a variety of digital

tools during that period, particularly for parents with school-aged children (Wavrock et al., 2022; Drouin et al., 2022). This ubiquity is especially relevant given the assertion that “it is when technological changes become pervasive, familiar and boring that they affect societies the most,” (2001, Wellman, p. 228). Further, given that children in Ontario “missed more in-class learning over the 22 pandemic months than anywhere in North America” (Benzie, 2022), this research is focused on Ontario parents, who experienced a significant increase in care responsibilities and parenting pressures.

This research seeks to explore whether parents perceived differences in support and community across social media platforms, their engaged activities, and their demographic factors such as income, racial identity, work-from-home status, and other relevant factors. This research investigates the complex role of social media in creating community, support, and social bonding for parents.

Literature Review

Digital / Virtual community

The idea of digital or virtual community (used interchangeably throughout this research) has been shaped by two key academics: Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Howard Rheingold. More than forty years ago, Starr Roxanne Hiltz co-authored *Network Nation: Human Communication via Computer* (1978). A sociologist by background, Hiltz worked with a computer scientist co-author to develop one of the foundational texts related to computer-mediated communications. Less focused on the technology itself, and more on its impact, they stated that communications using computer technologies must be seen "as a social process" (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978, p. 27). Where online community is concerned, they explored how community could be created in these new, emerging spaces, saying, "although the medium seems inherently impersonal, there have been many cases observed or reported…of the most intimate of

exchanges taking place between persons who have never met face-to-face and probably never will" (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978, p. 28).

Rheingold's influential book, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier,* was originally published in 1993, and asserted that "people in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind," (Rheingold, p. 3). Building on the scholarship from Hiltz and Rheingold, Blanchard and Welbourne provide a working definition of digital community: "Virtual communities are groups of people who interact primarily online through information and communication technologies (ICTs) and who have developed feelings of identity, belonging and attachment with each other—a sense of virtual community" (Welbourne et al., 2013, p. 131). Although now generally accepted as true, whether or not community could even be possible in virtual spaces has been hotly debated by

academics, with some arguing that community is geographically specific (as summarized in Driscoll & Lyon, 2002; Blanchard & Markus, 2004). While others, including sociologist Barry Wellman, "define 'community' as networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity...I do not limit my thinking about community to neighbourhoods and villages" (2001, p. 228).

Rheingold's foundational perspective on online communities was informed by his own lived experience with an early internet message board, and his book details that experience while suggesting that online communities present an opportunity for a renewed public space and more communal relationships (Rheingold, 1993).

In reviewing Rheingold's work, and detailing how it was received, Auckland University of Technology's Ian Goodwin states that Rheingold was "frequently criticised for taking an uncritical and celebratory stance on virtual

community" (2004, p. 104). Further, critics suggested Rheingold was utopian in his beliefs about the potential for online community and not critical enough about the potential for corporate interests and control to be exerted in these spaces (Goodwin, 2004, p. 106). Partly due to these criticisms, the debate around online community "has been characterised by a decade of polarised discussion" (Goodwin, 2004, p. 104). In outlining the response to Rheingold's work, Goodwin – twenty years ago, but still relevant – framed part of the current polarization around the value of virtual community and digital spaces that continues today, and is the context within which this research is taking place. However, even the word polarization deserves some context and nuance in a discussion related to social media.

In a 2022 article in *The Atlantic* titled, "Why the past 10 years of American life have been uniquely stupid," American social psychologist and author, Jonathan Haidt

suggests social media is significantly responsible for the current state where, “We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past.” (Haidt, 2022, para. 4). But the evidence is not uniform or consistent.

Writing in *The New Yorker*, Gideon Lewis-Kraus asks, “How harmful is social media?” and more deeply explores Haidt’s work and perspective (2002). Lewis-Kraus looks specifically at Haidt’s work with sociologist Chris Bale and a research assistant to develop a publicly accessible, Google document called *Social Media and Political Dysfunction: A Collaborative Review* to collect a crowd-sourced literature review related to social media impact and ills. It looked at different aspects related to the impact of social media on democracy, political polarization, echo chambers, and other social and political issues that represent some of the context for parents’ use of social media during the pandemic.

The collaborative review included over 500 articles and did not come down clearly on one side or the other about the benefits and risks of social media, with co-author Bale concluding, “we ought to be less sure about the particular impacts of social media” (Lewis-Kraus, 2022, para. 11). In introducing the collaborative review, the co-authors warn that, “We caution readers not to simply add up the number of studies on each side and declare one side the winner” (as quoted in Lewis-Kraus, 2022, para. 8). On the question of the role of social media in further political polarization, for instance, there are studies that confirm it does increase polarization, others that suggest engagement on some platforms actually can lead to “depolarization”, and other studies that are inconclusive on the subject (Lewis-Kraus, 2022). The authors contextualize these contradictions by saying, “Our findings indicate that political polarization on social media cannot be conceptualized as a unified phenomenon, as there are

significant cross-platform differences" (as quoted in Lewis-Kraus, 2022, para. 8).

Moving away from social media in a political context, to social media for community support, studies looking at digital communities built specifically for some focused populations – such as those with chronic health conditions – speak directly to this binary of positive and negative experiences. Wilson and Stock, for instance, interviewed young people with long-term health conditions about their experiences with digital community (2021). Their research demonstrated that, "social media use came with both 'good and bad sides' (i.e. with beneficial and detrimental effects)" (Wilson and Stock, 2021, p. 528). They go on to explore those nuances with the following "both/and" subthemes: "(1) Relationships: reducing social isolation versus need for face-to-face contact; (2) Comparisons: normalising versus negative (upward) comparisons; (3) Community: fitting in versus feeling left

out; (4) Emotions: inspiring versus distress contagion; (5) Knowledge: exchanging information versus fear of decline" (Wilson and Stock, 2021, p. 529).

Plett in her book-length essay *On Community*, makes a similar case for neither wholeheartedly embracing Rheingold's "utopian" views of digital community nor rejecting digital community as a space for corporate interests or political polarization, as per Haidt, saying:

> I'm sympathetic to the position that the harms of social media are grim and real, in ways we probably don't yet quite understand. But I'm skeptical of easy culprits, and I'm skeptical of the oft-repeated idea that today's digital world is marching us into an isolated doom (2023, p. 120).

As the evidence base continues to be developed, one of the key areas of investigation has been whether the type of social media use matters. In seeking to better

understand the positive and negative impacts of social media on youth and emerging adults, Keum et al. created profiles of use based on frequency and motivations for social media use, and then looked at reported psychosocial benefits and harms (2022). They established three profiles – active, average, and passive users, and found that:

> Compared to Average Users, (a) Active Users reported significantly better psychosocial well-being, but also more harmful outcomes; and (b) Passive Users experienced significantly lower levels of perceived social media benefits and social connectedness, while also reporting less problematic social media use and social media stress (Keum et al., 2022, para. 1).

Other pre-pandemic studies provide further insight into the potential value of social media based on frequency and type of use. Li et al. surveyed undergraduate students in China (2018). They were asked about stressful life

events, their use or "addiction" to the use of WeChat (the popular Chinese social media platform), and life satisfaction. They found that there was a "suppressing effect of WeChat addiction on the negative impact of stressful life events on life satisfaction" (Li et al., 2018, p. 194), which is to say significant WeChat use during stressful life events decreased the impact of those events. Li et al. reviewed research that looked at the negative impact of stressful life events and summarized that those negative impacts can be mitigated when people experience "emotional support and positive expectations" and approach these events with "humility and coping," and suggested these students were using WeChat in ways consistent with these mitigating behaviours (2018).

A 2018 study of American adults and the relationship between depressive symptoms and passive and active social media use by Escobar-Viera et al., found that active social media use either had no impact on depressive

symptoms or in some cases actually decreased symptoms of depression, while passive social media use worsened symptoms. The authors suggest this could be for a number of reasons including that those with depressive symptoms may use social media more passively due to their depression symptoms themselves, or that passive social media use "may trigger depressive symptomatology. For example, a person seeking social support may perceive not getting enough of it, which could contribute to depression" (Escobar-Viera, 2018, p. 440).

Bekalu et al. (2019) undertook a study of the impact of social media use on well-being. Data from a sample of American social media users looked not only at the frequency and duration of use of social media and the subsequent impact on wellness but also at social routines and the users' emotional connection to the platforms (Bekalu et al., 2019). They found that, "while routine use is associated with positive health outcomes, emotional

connection to social media use is associated with negative health outcomes" (2019, p. 69).

A 2013 study of two virtual health communities of people experiencing infertility looked at motivations for posting and receiving support, and the relationship between connectedness, community, and stress in those online communities (Welbourne et al., 2013). The study concluded that "receiving support was associated with a greater sense of virtual community as well as more general feelings of connectedness, which was related to less stress" (Welbourne et al., 2013, p. 129).

As technology has evolved so have studies and constructs of what a virtual community can be. In 2014, Fletcher et al. used their own experience of virtual community during their doctoral studies to suggest that the "virtual holding environment is a space where supportive relationships can be developed and maintained over time through the use of technology" (p. 90). Blanchard et al.

surveyed almost 300 parents on multiple different message boards on BabyCentre.com and found that even "merely observing the exchange of support between others, has positive outcomes for the group's functioning" (2011, p. 80). In some ways, long before the concept became popularly understood, researchers were identifying "lurking" as a potentially valuable activity in social networks.

In addition to the type of activities undertaken on social media, platforms used, and time spent while engaged online, research about virtual communities suggests that motivation for joining virtual communities can impact the benefit of that experience. The two main categories of motivation include information or resource seeking, and emotional or social support, especially in relation to health-focused virtual communities (Welbourne et al., 2013). Welbourne et al. found that being motivated to find emotional and social support was positively correlated with

a higher engagement in virtual community, and with providing support to others, while seeking information was associated only with receiving support (2013).

Existing and emerging literature demonstrates that the positive and negative experiences of virtual community can be based on a number of factors including the type of platform used, activity on that platform, and motivation for seeking out the community in the first place.

Parenting Digital Community Typologies

For over two decades, researchers and marketers have been working to better understand the types of communities that exist within social networks (Stanoevska-Slabeva, K. & Schmid, 2001). For parents, there are a number of key types of digital communities. In the early 2000s, “mommy blogs” were the primary space for conversations about parenting, and especially motherhood, online. Sarah Peterson’s 2023 book *Momfluenced: Inside*

the Maddening, Picture-Perfect World of Mommy Influencer Culture, chronicles the development of this digital space:

> Some of these early blogs were truly revolutionary in terms of expanding conversations about motherhood. In their heyday, mommy bloggers bitched, they snarked, they talked about postpartum depression. They made a huge impact on normalizing the hard, bloodier, more taboo sides of motherhood (p. 5).

As social media platforms like Instagram became more popular in the 2010s, "the mommy blogger [turned] into the 'momfluencer'" as bloggers pivoted to reach their audience in a new digital space (Grose, 2022, p. 123).

Facebook also continues to be a meaningful place for parents to find support and connection (Hooper et al, 2022). In looking at the experience of perinatal women in

seeking support and information on Facebook, Holtz et al. found that "Online support groups, and especially Facebook, appear to be a more convenient method than traditional online support groups" (2015).

Parenting Digital Community

It has been almost four years since a global pandemic was declared and parents, as expressed by the parenting columnist for *The Cut*, Amil Niazi, "still feel an ever-present buzzing of fear and worry" (2022, para. 7). When parents experience this level of anxiety, their children and society suffer. Some argue, "the integrity of every society ultimately depends upon the competent parenting of children in family units," (Westman, 1998). Pre-pandemic, in times of stress and challenge, parents looked to the community for support. As new technologies emerged, parents looked online and to digital communities for support, information, and resources (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005; Peterson, 2023; Hooper et al.,

2022; Bartholemew et al., 2012; Haslam et al., 2017). While research about the use of social media and engagement with digital community by parents during the pandemic is still emerging, there are pre-pandemic studies that act as helpful proxies.

A 2015 report from the Pew Centre found that 74% of parents of children 18 years of age or younger who used social media, used it to receive support from friends on various platforms and almost half the mothers said they strongly agree that they got support on social media (Duggan et al., 2015). Another study – though a decade old – found that online tools like social media and blogs enabled new mothers to feel connected, less alone, and anchored to identities outside of motherhood (Gibson & Hanson, 2013).

In her 2022 book, *Screaming on the Inside: The Unsustainability of American Motherhood*, New York Times parenting writer Jessica Grose interviews a number

of “momfluencers” revealing that for many, social media meant community. In reference to one such influencer, Grose says, “For Meg, posting to Instagram, which she began doing in 2012…helped her find her community, and a voice” (Grose, 2022, p. 127). In quoting another influencer, Grose shares that,

> Much of my time was spent alone with my kids. I felt both overwhelmed and underwhelmed by the work of the day. With Instagram, I made a chain of meaning out of the pictures I posted for my couple of dozen followers. (p. 127)

Further, Grose goes on to say “their confessional rants about dirty dishes and housework felt like communion. As the platform gained popularity, that communion became community,” (2022, p. 127).

Egmose et al. (2022) looked at the experience of mothers who interacted with three different kinds of

Instagram accounts: “InstaMoms” or momfluencers, professional profiles undertaking knowledge mobilization around parenting and child development, and a university-based account sharing information about child development. The results found that mothers felt supported by InstaParents and experienced a sense of community (Egmose et al, 2022). A study in the UK looking at the use of online forums to disclose, discuss, and learn about perinatal mental health issues, found that “forums are beneficial in providing women with an honest, realistic view and expectation of motherhood, thus supporting their transition to parenthood” (McSorley et al., 2022).

These findings about parents and digital community, however, are not universal. Archer and Kao’s research in 2018 about Australian women with children under four found that “while social support is an aspect of social media use, participants were largely ambivalent about their relationship with social media” (Archer & Kao,

2018, p. 122). In a study looking at social media use by parents and children early in the pandemic, Drouin et al. found that “among parents, higher anxiety was related to using social media for both social support and information seeking” and further posit that social media is more likely to be used by parents already experiencing anxiety (2020, p.730).

Parenting Digital Community and Social Capital

To better understand the experience of parents with digital community during the pandemic, an understanding of the presence of and necessity for these communities is important. The transition to parenthood when a first child is born was first identified in 1957 as “one of the family's most difficult adjustment periods” (as quoted in Bartholomew et al., 2012, p. 455). Bartholomew et al. go on to describe the importance of “social capital resources” for new parents as critical to this transition (2012, p. 456).

Social capital is defined as “the vibrancy of social networks and the extent to which individuals and communities trust and rely upon one another” (Toronto Foundation, 2023, p. 4). Social capital contemplates networks as strong-tie or weak-tie, where typically strong-tie networks are geographically specific, and include family and close friends, and weak-tie are more diffused and less personal (Hooper et al., 2022; Bartholomew et al., 2012). Social capital theory has deep roots across many disciplines including sociology, political science, and economics, but the more modern understanding of the term social capital was popularized by the American political scientist Robert Putnam (Claridge, 2015).

Putnam’s 1995 essay "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital", and later his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* published in 2000, form the basis of much of the academic and public policy conversation around the decline of in-

person social connections in society (Claridge, 2015). He defines social capital as "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms
of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (2000, p. 19) and argued first in his essay, then in his book, that social capital in the United States has been eroding since the 1950s. His framework has been taken up in the context of emerging digital community, with some seeing the advent of social media and networking platforms as a possible solution to addressing declining social bonds and connections (Blanchard, 1998).

Over 25 years ago, a study by an organizational psychologist Anita Blanchard concluded that "social capital and civic engagement will increase when virtual communities develop around physically based communities and when these virtual communities foster additional communities of interest" (1998, p. 293). More recent arguments come from the pollster Ipsos in a 2013 opinion

piece looking at the then-recent data around engagement online (Colledge, 2013). “Putnam was not wrong,” Ipsos concedes: “Traditional forms of civic engagement were and are in decline. Voting, religious attendance, political party membership, and even bowling may continue to drop off, however, this does not mean people are less socially engaged” (Colledge, 2013, para.19). Reinforcing the potential benefits of virtual community and social networks for building key elements of social capital, Welbourne et al. found that “support in a virtual community can increase participants’ general feelings of connectedness in their lives” (2013, p. 139).

From a parenting perspective, Bartholomew et al. look at “determinants of parenting” which include social capital resources usually “obtained through face-to-face relationships with family, friends, and community members,” but, the authors argue, “online social networking sites may also help new parents build and

maintain social capital" (Bartholomew, 2021, p. 457). This is an example of how, as per Putnam's concern, in-person connection has been, at least partially, replaced by online engagement and community. In fact, Egmose et al. go further still to assert that "part of the process of becoming a parent occurs online" (2022, p.1).

Bartholomew et al. explored this process of transitioning to parenthood and its relation to social capital in 2012, looking at new parent Facebook groups, and concluded that "the Internet allows new parents to build and maintain bridging social capital via interaction within weak-tie networks" (p. 457). Social capital is critical in the transition to new parenthood and platforms like Facebook allow for "effortless acquisition of various forms of social capital" (Bartholomew et al, 2021, p. 457). Hooper et al. confirm the scholarship that participation in "strong-tie online networks is more strongly linked to improved well-being than in weak-tie online networks" (2022, p. 533).

Weak-tie networks are usually associated with more public discussions and engagement, often on a specific topic. Hooper et al. acknowledge that for a number of reasons – including finding people with more specialized knowledge and expertise than in their strong-tie networks or some degree of anonymity – parents may be more interested in the weak-tie networks available through social media (2022).

The notion that the kind of content parents engage with, the way they engage with it, and the platforms used to engage could create differences in social capital acquisition and parenting efficacy all suggest that for parents of young children, social media presents that same non-binary potential for benefit and support as for other populations.

Parenting Digital Community in the Pandemic

In a 2022 study of the use of social media by parents during the pandemic, Hooper et al. found that "Across platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok,

there was a proliferation of content—humorous, academic, health-related—geared toward families with young children navigating pandemic challenges" (p. 530). Radomski et al. (2022) surveyed almost 600 Ontario mothers and found that "moderate-to-high caregiver strain" was reported by over 75% of respondents (p. 79). Almeida et al. (2020) assembled a narrative review of published articles about the impact of COVID-19 on women's mental health. Although only a few months into the pandemic, they had already identified that "Parenting may be substantially more stressful during a pandemic" (Almeida et al., 2020, p. 746). Further, they summarized that "Social support is a key protective factor [for mental health]. It can be enhanced via online contact—e.g., secure messaging with clinicians, telehealth visits, online support groups, online doula support" (2020, p. 746). As Holtz et al. assert "social support has been found to reduce levels of stress, which can improve overall health and quality of life" (2015, p. 415).

Grose (2022), asserts that “some spaces online have saved women’s lives, have provided solace and connection, and have offered a different vision of motherhood” (p. 117).

The theme, however, of both/and experiences with online spaces for parents continues. Basu et al. (2021) found that during the pandemic, women who engaged with news, social media, and other communications platforms, five or more times a day, experienced significantly increased odds of loneliness, relative to those who sought similar information less than one time a day. A systemic review of the experience of parents seeking health information for their children suggests that between 75 and 98% of parents used the Internet to find information (Kubb & Foran, 2020). For up to 50% of those parents, health information seeking was associated with high levels of anxiety and stress (Kubb & Foran, 2020).

Pedersen and Burnett (2022) undertook a review of news sources used by women about the pandemic on the

UK-based online parenting website, Mumsnet. The researchers found that this "third space" allowed mothers to "avoid the aggression women face when they attempt to discuss news in the wider public sphere of the Internet. This third space can also act as a 'trusted friend', allowing women to access important news via a third party" (2022, p. 1098). Adams et al. (2021) conducted a survey of American mothers with at least one child aged 5 to 18 at two early points in the pandemic and concluded that "Parent stress increased substantially during COVID-19 and has not returned to pre-COVID-19 levels" (n.p).

Canadian research conducted in a similar period of time with approximately 3,000 respondents echoed these findings, saying that "families with children <18 at home have experienced deteriorated mental health due to the pandemic" (Gadermann et al, 2021, p. 1).

Yatziv et al. appear to have conducted one of the only studies looking at parent stress on social media pre-

pandemic and during the pandemic. Consistent with other scholarship in the space, they cite that external social support is a key protective factor to "help buffer against the hardships of parenting demands" (Yatziv et al., 2022, p. 1129). Their research looked at "parental mentalization" which is the idea that parents are aware of their child's cognitive and psychological state, and engaged in supporting it. Parental mentalization is considered a core component of positive child-parent relationships and positive child development outcomes. Yatziv et al. conducted a content analysis of the language used by parents on social media pre and during the pandemic and found a significant decrease in language consistent with parental mentalization across genders, though the decrease was particularly significant for fathers (2022). They also found that, during the pandemic, parents reported an increase in "negative daily mood, stress, anxiety, and

depression compared with nonparents" (Yatziv et al., 2022, p. 1129).

The emerging literature is clear that the pandemic had, and continues to have, a negative impact on parents' mental health, especially mothers with young children. The literature also points to online contact being an important part of mitigating that impact. This research aims to understand how Ontario parents of young children utilized social media and digital communities for support during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Problem and Research Questions

The literature demonstrates that the process of becoming a parent is one of the most challenging transitions in a family's life. That process, the evidence shows, can be supported by social capital – both strong and weak ties. Historically, we have understood the acquisition of social capital as an exclusively in-person process,

however, parents have been using various social media platforms for information, support, and community, all contributing significantly to their ability to acquire social capital digitally.

While the potential of digital communities to foster real connections has been suggested, its value has also been heavily disputed. The value of social media continues to be contested, with some citing the benefits of digital connections while others point to the increase in polarization, isolation, and negative mental health impacts. However, on balance, the research does seem to suggest that the type of engagement, expectations of engagement, and types of platforms used can impact the benefits of digital community. This suggests that the experience of virtual communities on different social media platforms is nuanced and complex.

The COVID-19 pandemic put enormous pressure on parents of young children, decreased parental well-being,

increased parental stress, and required parents to acquire social capital in the form of information and connections and to do it all virtually. Given this context, this research set out to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How and to what extent did Ontario parents with children 10 years and under as of March 2022 experience a sense of digital community during the pandemic, between the period of March 2020 to March 2022?

RQ2: How and to what extent did this sense of digital community impact the experience of pandemic parenting?

RQ3: How and to what extent did the type of activity or choice of platform change the experience of digital community, defined as connection and sense of belonging?

Methodology

To answer the research questions, a literature review and a survey were used as research methods. A thematic literature review of key terms including digital community, digital community typologies, parenting and digital community, pandemic parenting, and social capital was conducted.

A survey of parents who used some form of social media and lived in Ontario at some point during March 2020 to March 2022, and had at least one child 10 years or younger as of March 2022, was developed. The survey and research proposal were reviewed and approved by McMaster's Research Ethics Board on September 26, 2023. A copy of the research ethics approval is included in Appendix A. Survey pre-testing was undertaken between September 28 and September 30 with seven friends and family members of the researcher. They provided feedback

on the flow of questions and technical issues that were addressed in the final survey.

The survey was put in the field on October 1, 2023, and was open until November 15, 2023. Created with the McMaster-recommended and enabled online survey tool, LimeSurvey, the survey included three screening questions and one consent question, which were the only mandatory questions. The screening questions confirmed that the respondents lived in Ontario at some point from March 2020 to March 2022, that they used at least one social media platform during that time, and that they had at least one child who was 10 or younger by March 2022.

In addition to the screening questions, there were five groups of questions that asked respondents to share which social media platforms they used, if their level of use changed, if they re-joined or left any specific platforms, their experience of digital community for pandemic parenting, and questions about their trust in various people

and organizations. Finally, participants were asked to share some demographic information about gender, employment status, income, and race. Most questions had an option to not answer at all, to click the "prefer not to answer" option, or, in some cases, to "click all that apply". The full survey is included in Appendix B.

The survey was shared using snowball and convenience sampling methods (Stacks, 2017). Specifically, the survey was posted on the personal social media platforms of the researcher including Instagram, Facebook, X (previously Twitter), Threads, and LinkedIn. Paid promotion of the survey was also undertaken by the researcher on Instagram and FB. The researcher also encouraged respondents to share with those they thought might be eligible for the survey, and the researcher shared broadly with networks via personal email.

There were 263 completed responses. As outlined in Table 1 below, 230 (87.4%) of respondents identified

themselves as female and 28 as men, and two as non-binary. Almost 85% of respondents were married, with another almost 10% partnered, but not married, representing a total of 249 of 263 partnered/coupled respondents or 94.68% of all survey respondents, as expressed in Table 2.

*Table 1: Survey question: How do you identify**?** [write-in option, responses summarized in the table]*

Response (*N*=263)	***N***	**%**
Female	230	87.4
Male	28	10.6
Non-binary	2	0.8
No answer	3	1.1

Table 2: Survey question: During March 2020 to March 2022, what best describes your marital status?

Response (*N*=263)	***N***	**%**
Married	223	84.8
Partnered but not married	26	9.9
Widowed	1	0.4
Divorced	1	0.4

Separated	4	1.5
Never married	6	2.3
Prefer not to say	0	0
No answer	2	0.8

Respondents were asked to share the number of children they had of different ages and 117 respondents had at least one child who was 3-4 years old at the time of the survey, and 56 had a child older than one, but not yet 3. Together, that represents 173 of 263 respondents who had a baby during the pandemic – or over 65% of respondents with at least one pandemic baby.

Survey respondents were asked to indicate what best describes their identity from a racial perspective, in a multiple-choice question. An overwhelming percentage – 82.9% – identified as White. Table 3 below provides a full description of how respondents identified. At the end of the survey, respondents had an opportunity to share any additional information or comments as write-in responses.

Two respondents stated that the racial identity options were too limited in that they did not provide an option to select multiple identities.

Table 3: Survey question: Which of the following best describes how you identify?

Response (*N*=263)	***N***	**%**
Black (including African, Caribbean, African-Canadian descent)	8	3.0
East Asian (including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese descent)	6	2.3
Latino (including Latin American, Hispanic descent)	3	1.1
Middle Eastern (including Arab, Persian, West Asian descent)	2	0.8
South Asian (including South Asian descent, e.g. East Indian, Pakistani)	11	4.2
Southeast Asian (including Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai)	4	1.5
White European descent	218	82.9
Indigenous (including First Nations, Métis, Inuit)	3	1.1
Prefer not to say	6	2.3
No answer	2	0.8

From an employment perspective, as outlined in Table 4 below, the majority (61%) of respondents reported that they had worked from home in paid employment for

the majority of the period of March 2020 to March 2022, with approximately 13% reporting that they worked at home in non-paying caregiving roles, and 13% went to work at a workplace outside home.

Table 4: Survey question: For the majority of the period of March 2020 to March 2022, how would you best describe your employment status?

Response (*N*=263)	***N***	**%**
Worked at workplace	35	13.3
Worked from home (paying employment)	161	61.2
Worked from home (non-paying employment i.e. caregiving)	36	13.7
Left employment to focus on parenting	12	4.6
Was not working due to the pandemic	10	3.8
Prefer not to say	4	1.5
No answer	5	1.9

Tables 5 and 6 outline the income level and relative levels of financial strain experienced by respondents during the pandemic. Table 5 outlines whether or not respondents experienced financial strain during March 2020 and March 2022. A majority – 58% – said they did not experience financial strain, while 38% said they did. Table 6 lists the

respondents' income. Almost 80% of respondents indicated their income was between $81,000 and $300,000.

Table 5: Survey question: From March 2020 to March 2022, did you experience any increased financial strain?

Response (*N*=263)	***N***	**%**
Yes	102	38.8
No	154	58.6
No Answer	7	2.7

Table 6: Survey question: Which of the following best describes your household take-home income during the first two years of the pandemic?

Response (*N*=263)	***N***	**%**
Under $40,000	11	4.2%
$41,000 to $80,000	28	10.5%
$81,000 to $160,000	99	37.6%
$161,000 to $300,000	87	33.1%
More than $301,000	18	6.8%
Prefer not to say	19	7.2%
No answer	1	0.4%

In summary, the 263 survey respondents were predominantly White, female, high-income parents who were able to work from home during the pandemic, did not experience financial strain, and had a pandemic baby. This profile is consistent with the researcher's profile and suggests that the respondents were drawn significantly from networks similar to the researcher's.

Research Findings

RQ1: How, and to what extent, did Ontario parents with children 10 years and under as of March 2020 experience a sense of digital community during the pandemic, between the period of March 2020 to March 2022?

To determine how and to what extent parents experienced a sense of digital community during the pandemic, respondents were asked to what degree they felt supported in their parenting by their use of social media

overall, and by specific platforms. While only 12% of respondents said they felt very supported – or rated their level of support at a 5 – approximately 68% of respondents rated the level of support they experienced at a 3 or 4 out of 5, which together with those who rated their level of support at a 5, represents 80% of survey respondents who felt some level of support from overall social media use. Put another way, only 6.7% of respondents reported they did not feel supported at all in their parenting by their use of social media. Responses are outlined in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Survey question: During the first two years of the pandemic, to what degree did you feel supported in your parenting through each platform, where 1 is not supported at all, and 5 is very supported?

Response (*n*=253*)	*n*	%
1 – not supported at all	17	6.7
2	33	13.0
3	95	37.5
4	79	31.2
5 – very supported	32	12.6

*Note: 7 respondents provided no answer. The responses in this table reflect the 253 respondents who answered this question.

Respondents were then asked to rate the level of support they felt on the following platforms: Facebook, Facebook Groups, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, LinkedIn, MarcoPolo, Reddit, TikTok, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube. LinkedIn and Twitter were the platforms where respondents felt the least supported in their parenting. WhatsApp, Facebook Groups, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram were the platforms where parents reported feeling the most supported. Twenty-five to 30% of respondents rated the level of support they felt on TikTok, MarcoPolo, and Reddit at a 4 or 5 out of 5. Table 8 is a summary of responses.

Table 8: Survey question: To what degree do you feel supported in your parenting by your use of the following platforms, where 1 is not supported at all and 5 is very supported?

Platform	**Level of support (in %*)** **1 Not supported at all**	**2**	**1 + 2 together**	**3**	**4**	**5 – very supported**	**4 + 5 together**
Facebook ***[n=223]***	22.4	22.4	44.8	22.4	22	7.2	29.2
FB Groups ***[n=206]***	16.5	10.7	27.2	10.7	35.9	19.4	55.3
FB Messenger ***[n=203]***	20.2	8.9	29.1	23.1	26.4	21.2	47.6
Instagram ***[n=238]***	13	12.6	25.6	29.8	32.8	11.8	44.6
LinkedIn ***[n=125]***	77.6	9.6	87.2	9.6	2.4	0.8	3.2
MarcoPolo ***[n=15]***	33.3	6.7	40.0	33.3	6.7	20	26.7
Reddit ***[n=53]***	25	25	50.0	25	19.2	5.8	25.0
TikTok ***[n=63]***	33.3	17.5	50.8	19.1	20.6	9.5	30.1
Twitter ***[n=115]***	47.8	26.1	73.9	17.4	7.8	0.9	8.7
WhatsApp ***[n=175]***	12.6	6.3	18.9	21.7	27.4	32	59.4
YouTube ***[n=120]***	23.3	18.3	41.6	35	14.2	9.2	23.4

Respondents were also given an opportunity to share qualitative information about their experience of support on social media during the pandemic. One parent shared the following, reflecting the overall sentiment expressed by the majority of those who shared comments:

> I was part of a mom's WhatsApp group and in many ways it 'saved me' as a new mom parenting in a pandemic. I was able to have conversations with a group of women all going through the same experiences I was going through and I learned a lot from this group of women in terms of parenting, and also got a lot of emotional support from them.

RQ2: How and to what extent did this sense of digital community impact the experience of pandemic parenting?

Survey respondents were asked to provide written comments about the impact of digital community on their experience of pandemic parenting. Specifically, they were

asked: Did your experience of digital community impact your experience of parenting in a pandemic?

Of the 263 survey respondents, 229 took the time to comment and expressed varied perspectives, sometimes in the same comment. Given that more than 65% of parents who responded to the survey had a baby during the pandemic, comments like the following were common:

> I had a baby during the pandemic, and I shared far more photos than I probably normally would -- but wanted people to get to meet her and watch her early months of life with so many important firsts. It felt nice during lockdowns in particular to share this way.

Another parent shared, “I was on maternity leave during the pandemic. My husband was working, I had a five-month-old, and literally, the only community I had was social media. I didn't have any colleagues to talk to or other adults,” and another stated, “with two children born during

COVID lockdowns, outside of immediate family this [social media] was a huge resource for information and support." Parents referenced online parenting groups through Facebook, WhatsApp, Reddit, and other platforms as being critical to keeping them connected. One survey respondent shared,

> I became a mom at the peak of the first covid wave, so there were no in person mom groups for me. My friends who have kids don't live nearby, and so it was mainly just a bubble with my husband, baby, and sometimes my and my husband's parents. I did keep in touch with some friends who have kids via social media. But the Reddit bumper group is who I feel like I've been in the trenches with, so to speak.

Even some parents who had previous, non-pandemic parenting experience, cited social media as an important part of their parenting experience: "It impacted positively - it gave me more connection than with my second non

pandemic baby because there were no limits to the number of people participating."

While the majority of comments from parents in the survey cited positive impacts of digital community on their pandemic parenting, approximately one-third of respondents who shared comments did not experience positive impacts, or shared comments that reflected both the experience of support and stress from social media use. These responses are from five different parents:

- "It probably stresses me out more than I realize."
- "It made me feel like I had to be perfect."
- "It definitely increased my anxiety!"
- "If anything, a negative impact - general mood and patience may have been impacted by misinformation."
- "It probably net negatively impacted my experience of parenting in a pandemic because it took me away from focusing on my kids at times."

Also common in the responses was the expression of the both/and impact of social media on the experience of pandemic parenting. One parent shared:

> Pulled in two directions. On the one hand, there was a sense particularly in our local area…of mutual support, and support for local businesses…There was also a lot of yelling at one another on the Internet, as you get. And increasingly as the pandemic wore on a sense of divisions or challenges. A sense of guilt from either exposing your kids to too much risk or not enough and you're holding them back from essential childhood experiences thanks to your own anxiety. What was supportive for the first few months probably devolved into being unhelpful for mental health and parenting.

Another parent expressed a similar sentiment around both/and:

> On the one hand, I definitely picked up all kinds of parenting tips from social media - anything from parenting techniques, to baby-wearing, to recipes. It also helped me better understand the developmental phases my kids were going through - seeing other parents experiencing the same things with their kids, helped me to feel calmer and better equipped to deal with them.
>
> On the other hand, I was not able to find a healthy balance with being online and I think it exacerbated certain unhealthy behaviours for me.

Another parent reflected that,

> It felt isolating because the people / medical experts I followed on Twitter were warning about harm and sharing tips on how to avoid Covid infection

> because of the risk to long-term health but Facebook and Instagram were all posts of real life friends and influencers who were living like the pandemic was over.

Parents were also asked if any accounts or influencers contributed to a sense of community online for them, and if so, why. Of the 263 survey respondents, 140 parents provided written comments. Over half (76) of those comments referenced parenting accounts that contributed to their sense of community – ranging from popular momfluencers and kid activity accounts to local moms they knew were sharing parenting information and ideas. The next most common response was local groups - mostly on Facebook and WhatsApp – focused on parenting, community activities, and buy/sell marketplaces. The rest of the responses included a mix of Facebook, Reddit, and WhatsApp-based due-date groups, groups formed sometimes based on geography, but primarily focused on

when your child was due and therefore focused on support for similar developmental milestones and experiences.

RQ3: How and to what extent did the type of activity or choice of platform change the experience of digital community, defined as connection and sense of belonging?

To inform how and to what extent the type of activity on social media or the choice of platform impacted the experience of digital community for parents, survey respondents were asked a number of questions about their social media use and activities. Table 9 outlines the platforms used by the survey respondents. They had the opportunity to choose as many as applied. Instagram was the platform used by 92% of parents surveyed, with Facebook and Facebook Messenger close behind at 85% and 76%. WhatsApp was the next most used platform, and MarcoPolo, Reddit, and TikTok were the least used. Respondents also had an opportunity to add any additional platforms they used. Seven reported using Slack, five

mentioned Discord, and Signal, Pinterest, Peanut, and Snapchat were shared by two respondents each.

Table 9: Survey question: social media platform(s) used (choose all that apply)

Response (*N*=1622)	***N***	**%**
Facebook	226	85.9
Facebook Groups	172	65.4
Facebook Messenger	202	76.8
Instagram	242	92.0
LinkedIn	138	52.5
MarcoPolo	11	4.2
Reddit	67	25.5
TikTok	70	26.6
Twitter	128	48.7
WhatsApp	199	75.7
YouTube	167	63.5

To develop a deeper understanding of platform use over the course of the pandemic, parents were asked if they joined or re-joined any platforms, and if so, why. Forty percent of respondents did join or rejoin a platform. More than 15% joined TikTok, and over 10% reported re-joining Facebook. Table 10 below provides further detail.

Table 10: Survey question: Did you join or re-join any platforms?

Response (*N*=156)	***n***	**%**
Facebook	13	4.9
Facebook Groups	24	9.1
Facebook Messenger	9	3.4
Instagram	18	6.8
LinkedIn	3	1.1
MarcoPolo	6	2.3
Reddit	5	1.9
TikTok	41	15.6
Twitter	16	6.1
WhatsApp	17	6.5
YouTube	4	1.5

When given an opportunity to share why they re-joined some platforms, many said they rejoined Facebook to stay in touch with older family, family, and friends across distance, to be part of baby "due date" groups, neighborhood groups, and buy/sell groups. For those who joined TikTok, they shared that it was new, entertaining, and provided distraction.

Parents were asked if there were any social media platforms they left during the pandemic, and almost 20%

reported they did leave at least one. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok were the platforms respondents reported that they left. They cited several reasons for Facebook, including one parent who said, “Lots of older relatives sharing misinformation and getting angry,” and another who said, “angry older people.” Some cited leaving “for my mental health,” others left due to misinformation, and one parent shared they left Facebook because the neighborhood parenting groups grew “too intense”. One parent said they left Twitter because it was “full of idiots.”

One parent shared their reason for leaving Instagram, saying: “Couldn’t handle the stress of so many different opinions of ppl [sic] I cared about but was affecting friendship. And other peoples kids were doing so well (and mine weren’t) so it only exacerbated my stuck at home feeling.”

Parents were also asked if there were any accounts or influencers they unfollowed, and why. Of the 263 survey

respondents, 134 provided written comments about accounts they unfollowed. Of those, 82 referenced unfollowing accounts due to a number of COVID-19-related things: those who were anti-vaccine, sharing misinformation, convoy supporters, and those not taking pandemic precautions seriously. Some who mentioned COVID-19 stated that they actually stopped following many of the medical and scientific influencers they started following at the start of the pandemic because the amount of information and fear felt overwhelming. Another 10 unfollowed accounts and influencers who held parenting perspectives that were not aligned or who made them feel more overwhelmed as a parent. Another 10 shared that they unfollowed those with political perspectives that did not align with theirs or where the opinions were too “angry” or intense, and another 8 shared that they unfollowed those who were not explicitly commenting on social justice issues like Black Lives Matter. A few cited feeling jealous

of some accounts and how well they were doing, so they unfollowed. The influencer account mentioned specifically most often was @TakingCaraBabies, a popular sleep expert and influencer who was a Trump supporter (Mills, 2021).

In addition to inquiring about the types of platforms used, the survey also prompted parents to reflect on the various activities conducted on those platforms. Table 11 summarizes responses where respondents were able to choose as many responses as reflected their experience. Eighty-nine percent said they used social media for distraction, 84% cited humor and finding information as a key activity on social media, and 82% said they were on social media to lessen pandemic isolation. There was also an option for parents to write in additional social media activities. Four respondents said they used it for buy-sell groups, two wrote in “doomscrolling,” and three mentioned creating and posting content, including one parent who shared “Because of my posting on Twitter, National

Geographic Education reached out and asked if I could write a blog post for them."

Table 11: Survey question: There are many things you can do with social media. In the first two years of the pandemic – March 2020 to March 2022 – how were you using social media?

Response (*N*=1412)	***n***	**%**
activities for kids	176	66.9
humour	221	84
lessen pandemic isolation	216	82.1
parenting advice	180	68.4
provide distraction	236	89.7
provide information	222	84.4
recipes	161	61.2

Survey respondents were also asked to share more about how they engaged on social media. Table 12 summarizes the responses. Liking content was the most common action taken, while job searching was the least common, with a majority saying they commented, shared, direct and personal messages, posted photos and captions, and "lurked".

Table 12: What kind of activities did you do on social media over this period of time? [click all that apply]

Response (*N*=1392)	***N***	**%**
Comment	173	65.8
Like	212	80.6
Share	185	70.3
Job searching	46	17.5
"Lurk"	190	72.2
Direct Message	194	73.8
Personal Messaging	206	78.3
Posted photos and captions	186	70.7

Levels of use of social media were also explored. Over half of the respondents said their use of social media significantly increased over the study period, 35% identified some increased use, and fewer than 5%, or 6 people, indicated their use decreased. Table 13 below outlines reported use.

Table 13: Survey question: Thinking of how often you were on social media, did it increase or decrease during the first two years of the pandemic, on average?

Response (*N*=263)	***n***	**%**
Significantly increased use	143	54.4
Some increased use	91	34.6
Neither increased or decreased	20	7.6
Some decreased use	4	1.5
Significantly decreased use	2	0.8
Prefer not to say	0	0
No answer	3	1.1

Analysis

RQ1: How and to what extent did Ontario parents with children 10 years and under as of March 2020 experience a sense of digital community during the pandemic, between the period of March 2020 to March 2022?

Ontario parents who used some kind of social media and had young children during the first two years of the pandemic reported experiences of virtual community consistent with the emerging literature on the subject. Only 7% of the respondents reported that they did not experience

support in their parenting through digital community, and qualitative comments overwhelmingly cited the positive impacts of being digitally connected and in the community. Also consistent with the literature, parents reported a mix of experiences: feeling more supported and less isolated overall, yet experiencing varying emotions across platforms, including increased anxiety and comparison alongside that experience of support.

Wilson and Stock's 2021 study of digital community for people experiencing chronic health issues provides a useful framework to categorize the experience of Ontario parents with young children who were surveyed, with the following categories of experiences:

1. Relationships: reducing social isolation versus the need for face-to-face contact;
2. Comparisons: normalizing versus negative (upward) comparisons;
3. Community: fitting in versus feeling left out;

4. Emotions: inspiring versus distress contagion;
5. Knowledge: exchanging information versus fear of decline (Wilson and Stock, 2021, p. 529).

Where relationships are concerned, 80% of parents surveyed went to social media looking to lessen their pandemic isolation, and qualitative comments confirmed that they found the experience of digital community did reduce their sense of isolation. The need for face-to-face contact, however, was still identified as critical and as missing during the pandemic, with one parent sharing that both/and as follows: “I was parenting a newborn delivered very early in the pandemic, and being able to seek information and support virtually was helpful in some ways, though no substitute for in person interaction.” Another parent echoed this sentiment, “I definitely consumed a lot of parenting content but it highlighted that I was missing the in person connection I had envisioned.”

In looking at the role of comparisons, another parent reflected on the presence of both normalizing and negative comparisons:

> I found parenting spaces on Reddit with like-minded dads, which were very good spaces to share relatable stories and struggles. Overall, it lessened the feelings of isolation. That said, Facebook and Instagram are places where people go to curate a biased image of themselves as great, which is not healthy and could increase feelings of isolation.

The following three comments from different parents further delve into this contradictory set of experiences:

- "If anything, I'd say that I felt comforted by a more realistic portrayal of the lives of other parents in pandemic days. The usual shiny filtered image was mostly dropped, and that honesty made those parents more relatable."

- “Social media can trigger imposter syndrome and feelings of wanting to follow/do what others were doing.”
- “It contributed to my feeling of being a social pariah since I had a young kid who couldn’t understand social distancing or get vaccinated early on.”

Wilson and Stock described the sense of community experienced in their study as a dichotomy between “fitting in and feeling left out”. This too was reflected in the feedback from Ontario parents. One parent said, “It was the most challenging time of my life and social media was a lifeline to connection, sense of purpose and place and a window into my life before kids and COVID.” Another spoke to the opposite experience of not fitting in: “I couldn’t find my “people” and so often felt awkward, like a viewer rather than a peer. I’d leave feeling depressed and resentful for the time I’d wasted.”

Further, when parents were asked which accounts they unfollowed during the pandemic, a number mentioned unfollowing influencers or people they knew who seemed to be doing better: “It made me feel less alone in lots of ways. It also made me feel guilty when I saw other families getting outside and doing more when I was barely surviving.”

Another parent, reflecting overall on their experience of community and feeling left out of local Facebook groups, commented that as the pandemic wore on,

> I quickly realized that there's a huge proportion of parents in my neighbourhood who are NOT in these groups. I was seeing the groups as representing the whole community, when in reality, there are plenty of people who are not online in that way.

Wilson and Stock’s study was focused on young people with chronic health issues, but the health context of

the pandemic mirrors the dynamics they outline around the emotional impact of virtual community that were sometimes inspiring and other times created “distress contagion” and the final category of knowledge around exchanging information versus fear of “decline” or, in a COVID-19 context, fear and anxiety around getting sick.

More than 84% of parents surveyed said they went to social media looking for information. Some respondents found following science influencers fostered community, while others unfollowed accounts due to COVID-19 overload, expressing dissatisfaction with social media.

From a healthcare perspective, a number of parents mentioned using social media to find vaccines and that the experience of finding them created a sense of digital community: “[social media] gave a sense of solidarity, and practical things like tracking down vaccine appointments for family members.”

To further explore how and to what extent parents with young children in the pandemic experienced digital community, Blanchard and Welbourne's definition of virtual community as people interacting in virtual spaces where they have "developed feelings of identity, belonging and attachment with each other" is instructive (2013, p. 131).

In these ways, Rheingold's vision for virtual communities as providing opportunities for renewed public space and more communal relationships was confirmed by Ontario parents. The critics who voiced caution around these virtual spaces being the "utopia" imagined by Rheingold were also validated by the experience of these Ontario parents. The polarization of the debate around the value of virtual communities identified by Goodwin, and the discussion around political and social polarization of these online spaces, as reflected on by Haidt and Lewis-

Kraus was also present for Ontario parents in their use of social media during the pandemic.

The most cited reason for unfollowing an account or an influencer was related to COVID-19 misinformation, anti-vaccine sentiments, and support for the trucker convoy. At a Toronto book event on February 7, 2024, Insta-famous obstetrician and pro-science advocate, Dr. Jen Gunter commented on the importance of unfollowing or blocking content that feeds disinformation, especially in a health context, saying: “You are in control of your own social media algorithm.” A recent Instagram post of Gunter’s speaks to this same idea: “One important strategy to protect yourself is to block people spreading disinformation, this protects you from seeing their content and tells the algorithm that you aren’t interested in this” (Dr. Jen Gunter, 2024).

In this way, these parents – almost 90% of whom indicated they somewhat or significantly increased their use

of social media during the pandemic – were active in curating their own virtual communities, unfollowing content that did not align with their values around the promotion of science. Plett, in her essay *On Community*, suggests that maybe with new technologies, we are not "always losing and gaining" (2023, p. 121). Plett suggests that,

> Community can be fractured and slippery and seemingly ever at risk of dissolution at the same time that it can consistently regroup and re-solder itself, mutate in ever-new fashions, form a balm to meet needs in ways it is difficult to predict or imagine (2023, p. 121).

Reflections from Ontario parents on the accounts they unfollowed, the awareness they expressed about the impact of social media on their parenting and well-being and the fact that fewer than 20% of parents rated the level of support they found in digital community at a 1 or 2

(where 1 is no support at all), suggest that parents are actively remaking their digital spaces, making it new to meet their needs.

RQ2: How and to what extent did this sense of digital community impact the experience of pandemic parenting?

In 1978, Hiltz and Turoff – long before the advent of social media – were already identifying "the most intimate of exchanges taking place between persons who have never met face-to-face and probably never will" (Hiltz and Turoff, p. 28). Forty-five years later, Ontario parents confirmed that early finding. One parent shared that "I don't know how I would have been a first time parent in a pandemic without my Discord group. They're all essential, real friends now."

Parents with young children were the focus of this research, and in particular, understanding the ways in which digital community contributed to them feeling supported in their parenting. This is an important question because, as the literature outlines, the ability of parents to

acquire social capital is critical to their ability to bridge the transition to parenthood. In responding to the impact of digital community on their parenting, a number of parents spoke to its impact on reducing their parenting confidence saying:

- "The more voices I saw and heard led to more confusion and self-criticism of my parenting approach (rather than trusting my instincts)."
- "The Instagram side of things has often been more negative, as having tons of random reels with parenting/baby content "suggested" at you can cause you to compare yourself a lot which can make you feel insecure or like you're not doing enough."
- "Sometimes I think more information means less power and that parents are often second guessing their great instincts because of loud

> voices online. It didn't alter my experience but it also didn't add value to it most days."

Others expressed this experience of digital community as both/and at the same time: "It saved me from feeling isolated but made me addicted," reflecting research findings of Wilson and Stuck (2021) and Plett (2023). Li et al. (2018) specifically studied this phenomenon of social media "addiction" and actually found it to have a protective impact against stressful situations for university students. Their study is one that raises questions about the ways and frequency that social media is used and its impact on the experience of digital community.

RQ3: How and to what extent did the type of activity or choice of platform change the experience of digital community, defined as connection and sense of belonging?

The literature suggests that the platform, motivation, and frequency of social media use could have

an impact on its benefits and risks (Keum et al., 2022; Welbourne, 2013, Li et al., 2018). In looking at the frequency of use and benefits, Keum et al. identified three profiles of users – active, average, and passive – and found that active, more frequent users experienced more of the benefits but also more of the stress associated with social media use, while passive users experienced less of the stress, and less of the benefits of social connectedness (Keum et al., 2022).

When Escobar-Viera et al. (2018) looked at whether or not active or passive social media use had an impact on symptoms of depression, they found that active use either had no impact, or in some cases decreased symptoms, and that passive use worsened symptoms. This, they suggested, could also be because people who are already experiencing depression may engage more passively as a result of their symptoms and not find the support they need. While this research did not look directly at mental health and well-

being, many of the comments shared by parents indicate a mix of experiences with some who felt less isolated and better supported and others who said they felt more isolated by their digital experience.

Table 14 below outlines the correlation between the level of overall support parents experienced in their parenting on social media and whether or not their social media use increased or decreased. No strong negative or positive correlations were found. Given that 143 of the 263 respondents said they significantly increased their use of social media, and only 2 said their use significantly decreased, correlations based on changes in level of use would not be reliable.

Table 14: Correlation between the level of support in parenting on social media (1 = not supported and 5 = very supported) and whether social media use increased or decreased

	Sign. increased	***Some increased***	***Neither increased or decreased***	***Somewhat decreased***	***Significantly decreased***
1 support	-0.16	0.07	0.22	-0.03	-0.02
2 support	-0.13	0.13	0.02	-0.05	0.10
3 support	0.04	-0.06	0.02	0.04	-0.07
4 support	0.12	-0.02	-0.13	-0.01	-0.06
5 support	0.04	-0.03	-0.06	-0.05	0.10

The literature on virtual community points to the motivation for seeking community on social media as being a potential factor in the level of support people experience. To understand the degree to which this was the case for Ontario parents, a correlation was run between the level of support parents experienced in their parenting from digital community and what they indicated they were seeking in digital community. Table 15 outlines the correlations. No strong correlations were identified. The strongest correlation was a negative correlation between seeking

support on social media for parenting advice and feeling supported overall by social media. To the degree that a correlation between these two factors exists, it could suggest a level of skepticism about parenting advice on social media by parents.

Table 15: Correlation between level of support in parenting on social media (1 = not supported and 5 = very supported) and what respondents were seeking on social media

	1 support	***2 support***	***3 support***	***4 support***	***5 support***
Activities for kids	-0.18	-0.05	-0.01	0.09	0.09
Humour	-0.27	0.04	-0.08	0.13	0.07
Lessen pandemic isolation	-0.16	-0.15	0.00	0.15	0.05
Parenting advice	-0.35	-0.21	0.05	0.20	0.18
Provide distraction	-0.27	0.05	0.02	0.08	-0.03
Provide information	-0.19	-0.03	0.00	0.05	0.06
Recipes	-0.11	0.02	-0.02	0.10	-0.01

Correlations were also run between the level of support in parenting on social media and what kinds of actions – for

instance, commenting, posting, “lurking”, etc. – respondents took on social media. No negative or positive correlations were found.

While not originally identified as a research question, the fact that a majority – 65% – of respondents had a baby during the pandemic, a correlation was run to see if there was a relationship between the level of support experienced and being the parent of a pandemic-born baby. Again, while no strong negative or positive correlations were found, a high level of support was progressively indicated. Table 16 below details this correlation.

Table 16: Correlation between the level of support in parenting on social media (1 = not supported and 5 = very supported) and having a baby at some point during the pandemic

	Had a baby during the pandemic
1 support	-0.20
2 support	0.00
3 support	-0.01
4 support	0.03
5 support	0.12

Though not explicitly stated in the research questions, this research was also interested in understanding if there were significant differences in the experience of virtual communities broken down by various demographic factors including race, gender, and socio-economic status. However, given the relative homogeneity of respondents, analysis of these dimensions would not produce meaningful results. For instance, as laid out in Table 3 above, 218 respondents identified as White and the second largest group to identify were 11 who identified as South Asian. Comparing sample sizes that small would not enrich the analysis.

Research Limitations

The key research limitation was related to the lack of diversity in survey respondents. Despite a strong response of 263 parents who completed the survey, the diversity of respondents was very limited and reflected the profile and demographic characteristics of the researcher. This was a

significant limitation in the data and analysis. Further, asking participants to remember their social media use from up to three years ago could have resulted in less than accurate data. Additional limitations included responses that were identified by survey respondents as being too narrow around race. Specifically, respondents were not able to choose more than one ethnic/racial category. Another limitation is that the survey did not ask respondents to indicate their geography beyond living in Ontario at some point between March 2020 and March 2022. This means that any dimensionality around rural/urban, north/south, and small/large cities was absent. A further limitation is the personal bias of the researcher. As a person who gave birth at the start of the pandemic, and engaged with digital community regularly, the researcher has a perspective and experience that could have biased the shape of the survey, the analysis, and the final conclusions.

Implications and Future Research

This study of the experience of Ontario parents with digital communities during the first two years of the global COVID-19 pandemic revealed that social media meant different, often contradictory things, often to the same people. This finding contributes to the emerging literature and important public policy conversations around the value and harms of social media. If social media for parenting digital communities is both support and stress, and not either/or, then policy responses must be as well. This could look like enhanced digital literacy support for new parents to help them navigate, critically evaluate, and appropriately engage in these online spaces, with an evidence-informed understanding of the potential benefits and risks.

Further, as evidence continues to be developed around digital well-being, judgment-free resources for parents to understand how certain kinds of engagement with virtual communities on social media can impact

mental wellness and provide community and social support would be valuable. Beneficial for all groups, including parents, continued efforts to work with social media platforms to address mis and disinformation, particularly related to health and parenting issues remains critical.

This research demonstrates that even while parents were aware of and experienced some of the potential risks and harms associated with social media and digital communities, they also overwhelmingly experienced parenting support in these spaces. Work to educate those who interact with and support parents, including a range of health care providers, early years programs and schools, parent-focused media, and others, of these both/and impacts could help encourage a more solutions-focused approach to provide the right information at the right time to parents who need it. In addition, an understanding that parents with young children are able to hold this nuance and complexity suggests the importance of removing

judgment-laden language, or shame, from the conversation about social media use, and instead focusing on the evidence around some of the best, more effective ways to engage.

Despite the cited challenges to recruiting parents with young children to participate in research (Bennetts et al., 2019; Dworkin et al., 2016), this survey of Ontario parents resulted in 263 completed responses. In addition to a significant number of questions about social media use, trust, and demographics, respondents were given opportunities to provide written comments, and the vast majority did. Respondents shared about mental health struggles, isolation, fear, frustration with misinformation, and more. This suggests, perhaps, that this cohort of (mostly) Millennial parents have something to say, and there is an opportunity to listen. As a result, a further implication of this research is that continued work in the space of improving digital spaces for parents or

understanding their needs, experiences, and outcomes, should involve parents.

This topic would benefit from further research aimed at diversifying the pool of respondents. As previously cited, more than 80% of the respondents were White, fewer than half experienced financial strain during the pandemic, the overwhelming majority were married or partnered, and only 30 of 263 identified as something other than female. Focus groups with parents from a wider, more representative set of demographic backgrounds would provide a significant dimension to the research questions. In addition, undertaking the same study in different geographies across Canada, or other comparable jurisdictions could reveal similarities and differences that could be valuable for future learning. As explored in the research limitations, parents were not asked where they lived – whether in cities, towns, or smaller rural communities. Research to look at similarities and

differences based on this kind of geography could also be valuable.

Longitudinal research of this same demographic could aid in developing an understanding of the long-term impact the pandemic had on the perception of digital community for these parents.

Another area for potential future research could be to better understand the digital literacy of parents and how and to what extent high or low levels of digital literacy impact the experience of digital communities for parenting. Finally, while discussed at a high level in this research, a deeper look at the mental health impacts of digital communities would be valuable for future research.

Conclusion

In a moment characterized by increasing concern about the polarization of society and increased mental health concerns related to social media use, it would be

understandable to view virtual community with skepticism, and for policymakers, health and social leaders, and parents alike to find ways to limit the use of social media. The risk of this approach is that it does not leave enough room for the complexity of these spaces and the ways that they might be helping to increase connection and belonging, and in turn, to support the acquisition of social capital, at least for parents with young children.

Social media is not just one thing: it is not just the addiction from which we need to recover; it is not just about connection and community. It is both of those things at the same time.

No one study will be able to make a case for or against social media as an important creator of digital community for parents – or any other group for that matter – but continuing research in this space is valuable in deepening our understanding of the complexities, and sometimes contradictions, present in the experience of

virtual community. In the final section of the survey of Ontario parents, they were asked if they had any final thoughts. Two comments were striking in their vulnerability and similarities, “This was an exceptionally difficult time in my life, I'm thankful to see studies that are starting to look at it” and “Thanks for the opportunity to share! This is something I've thought about a lot as I processed the last few years, so I appreciate the opportunity to talk about it.”

If we accept that “part of the process of becoming a parent occurs online” (Egmose et al., 2022, p.1) then what happened online for parents with young children during the pandemic matters a great deal for how digital community is designed for parents. This research provided information about Ontario parents' engagement with digital communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing an experience of support and stress. This feedback from Ontario parents highlights how these digital spaces

provided essential support and a sense of belonging in an extended moment of crisis, while also posing challenges and stress due to misinformation, comparison, and overexposure. The findings underscore the importance of understanding the complexities of these spaces – that social media use for parenting digital communication is not only supportive or stressful – and is an area rich in further research potential. The research has led to the researcher's conclusion that a balanced, nuanced approach to digital community is necessary, and that inclusive, supportive, and informative online environments for parents – especially when navigating crises – can have benefits.

References

Almeida, M., Shrestha, A., Stojanac, D. *et al.* (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's mental health. *Archives of Women's Mental Health,* 23, 741–748. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-020-01092-2

Adams, E.L., Smith, D., Caccavale, L.J., & Bean, M.K. (2021). Parents Are Stressed! Patterns of Parent Stress Across COVID-19. *Front Psychiatry:* doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2021.626456.

Archer, C., & Kao, K.-T. (2018). Mother, baby and Facebook makes three: does social media provide social support for new mothers? *Media International Australia*, *168*(1), 122–139. https://doi-

org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1177/1329878X18783016

Bartholomew, M.K., Schoppe-Sullivan, S.J., Glassman, M., Kamp Dush, C.M. and Sullivan, J.M. (2012), New Parents' Facebook Use at the Transition to Parenthood. Family Relations, 61: 455-469. https://doi-org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2012.00708.x

Basu A, Kim HH, Basaldua R, Choi KW, Charron L, Kelsall N, et al. (2021, April 21) A cross-national study of factors associated with women's perinatal mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. *PLoS ONE* 16(4): e0249780. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249780

Bekalu M.A., McCloud R.F., & Viswanath K. (2019). Association of social media use with social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health: Disentangling routine use from emotional connection to use. *Health Education & Behavior*, 2, 69S-80S. https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198119863768

Bennetts, S.K., Hokke, S., Crawford, S., Hackworth, N.J., Leach, L.S., Nguyen, C., Nicholson, J.M., & Cooklin. A.R. (2019). Using Paid and Free Facebook Methods to Recruit Australian Parents to an Online Survey: An Evaluation. Journal of Medical Internet Research: 21 (3). doi: 10.2196/11206

Benzie, R. (2022, January 6). Why did Doug Ford flip-flop on closing schools? Here's the inside story. *Toronto*

Star.
https://www.thestar.com/politics/provincial/why-did-doug-ford-flip-flop-on-closing-schools-here-s-the-inside-story/article_97cb1315-822c-517d-8646-29a6a3ab26fd.html?

Blanchard, A.L. (1998, October). Virtual Communities and Social Capital. Social Science Computer Review: 16 (3), 293-307. DOI:10.1177/089443939801600306

Blanchard, A. L., Welbourne, J. L., & Boughton, M. D. (2011). A mode of online trust: The mediating role of norms and sense of virtual community. *Information, Communication & Society*, *14*(1), 76–106. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691181003739633

Blanchard, A.L. and Markus, M.L. (2004). The experienced "sense" of a virtual community: characteristics and processes. *ACM SIGMIS Database: the DATABASE for Advances in Information Systems*: 35(1), 64–79. https://doi-org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1145/968464.968470

Claridge, T. (2015). *Putnam on social capital democratic or civic perspective*. Institute for Social Capital. https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/putnam-on-social-capital-democratic-or-civic-perspective/

Colledge, M. (2013). From "Bowling Alone" to Bowling Online: The Link between Social Media and Social Capital. Ipsos. https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/knowledge/society/bowling-alone-bowling-online-link-between-social-media-and-social-capital

Driskell, R.B. and Lyon, L. (2002), Are Virtual Communities True Communities? Examining the Environments and Elements of Community. *City & Community*, 1: 373-390. https://doi-org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1111/1540-6040.00031

Drouin, M., McDaniel, B.T., Pater, J., Toscos, T. (2020). How Parents and Their Children Used Social Media and Technology at the Beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Associations with Anxiety. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*: 23 (11), 727-736. https://doi-org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1089/cyber.2020.0284

Duggan, M., Lenhard, A., Lampe, C., & Ellison, N.B. (2015, July 16). *Parents and Social Media.* Pew

Research Centre. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/07/16/parents-and-social-media/

Egmose, I., Thode Krogh, M., Stuart, A.C., Wahl Haase, T., Back Madsen, E., & Skovgaard Vaever, M. (2022, July). How are mothers negatively affected and supported by following parenting-related Instagram profiles? A mixed-methods study. *Acta Psychologica*, 227. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103593

Escobar-Viera, C.G., Shensa, A., Bowman, N.D., Sidani, J.E., Knight, J., James, A.E., Primack, B.A. (2018, July). Passive and Active Social Media Use and Depressive Symptoms Among United States Adults. *Cyberpsychology*, *Behavior*, and

Social *Networking:* 21(7): 437-443. doi: 10.1089/cyber.2017.0668

Fletcher, K. L., Comer, S. D., & Dunlap, A. (2014). Getting Connected: The Virtual Holding Environment. *Psychoanalytic Social Work*, *21*(1–2), 90–106. https://doi.org/10.1080/15228878.2013.865246

Gadermann A.C., Thomson K.C., Richardson C.G., et al. (2021). Examining the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on family mental health in Canada: findings from a national cross-sectional study. *BMJ Open, 11,* 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-042871

Gibson, L., & Hanson, V. L. (2013). Digital motherhood: How does technology help new mothers? *Human*

Factors in Computing Systems, 313-322, https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2470654.2470700

Goodwin, I. (2004). Book review: H. Rheingold. 1993. The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier. Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture: 1(1): 103-109.

Griffith A.K., Bedard K.E., Eaton A., Ackerlund Brandt J.A., & Jha P. (2022, July 25). Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Parental Burnout and Parenting Practices: Analyses Using a Retrospective Pretest. *Chronic Stress.* https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9329813/

Grose, J. (2022). *Screaming on the Inside: The Unsustainability of American Motherhood.* Mariner Books.

Gunter, J. (2024, February 7). *The Science, Medicine, and Mythology of Menstruation* [Book launch]. Rotman School of Management and Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE), Toronto, ON.

Dr. Jen Gunter [@drjengunter]. (2024, February 10). I've been asked a lot about social media and medical disinformation on book tour. One important strategy is to protect [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C3LEIX-ALL8/?img_index=1

Haslam, D.M., Tee, A. & Baker, S. (2017). The Use of Social Media as a Mechanism of Social Support in Parents. *Journal of Child and Family Studies: 26,*

2026–2037. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0716-6

Haidt, J. (2022, May). Why the last 10 years of American life have been uniquely stupid. *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/

Haidt, J. and Bail, C. (eds). Social Media and Political Dysfunction: A Collaborative Review. Google doc: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vVAtMCQnz8WVxtSNQev_e1cGmY9rnY96ecYuAj6C548/edit

Hiltx, S.R. and Turoff, M. (1978). The Network Nation: Human Communication via Computer. MIT Press.

Hooper, A., Schweiker, C., & Kerch, C. (2022, November 29). Social support in parenting Facebook group

during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Family Science*: 72 (2), 530-546. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12804

Holtz, B., Smock, A., & Reyes-Gastelum, D. (2015). Connected motherhood: Social support for moms and moms-to-be on Facebook. *Telemedicine and e-Health*: 21 (5), 415-421. https://doi.org/10.1089/tmj.2014.0118.

Jang, J., Hessel, H., Dworkin, J. (2017). Parent ICT use, social capital, and parenting efficacy. Computers in Human Behavior: 71, 395-401. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.02.025.

Kubb C. & Foran, HM. (2020, August 25). Online health information seeking by parents for their children: Systematic review and agenda for further research.

Journal of Medical Internet Research: 22(8). doi: 10.2196/19985.

Li, B., Wu, Y., Jiang, S., Zhai, H. (2018, March). WeChat Addiction Suppresses the Impact of Stressful Life Events on Life Satisfaction. *Cyberpsychology*, *Behavior*, and Social *Networking: 21 (3),* 194-198. doi: 10.1089/cyber.2017.0544.

Li X., Vanderloo, L.M., & Keown-Stoneman, C.D.G. (2021). Screen use and mental health symptoms in Canadian children and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAMA Network Open:* 4(12):e2140875. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.40875

Lukpat, A. (2022, January 23). These mothers were exhausted, so they met on a field to Scream. *New*

York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/mom-scream-massachusetts-pandemic.html

McSorley, L., Deighton-Smith, N., Budds, K., & Wang, X. (2022). "Hang in there mama!" The role of online parenting forums in maternal mental health. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, *16*(4), Article 11. https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2022-4-11

Mills, M. (2021, January 22). Everything you need to know about the Taking Cara Babies Drama. *Parents.com.* https://www.parents.com/news/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-taking-cara-babies-drama/

Naderifar, M., Goli, H., & Ghaljaie, F. (2017). Snowball sampling: A purposeful method of sampling in qualitative research. *Strides in Development of Medical Education*: 14 (3). doi: 10.5812/sdme.67670.

Niazi, A. (2022, May 6). Being a 'Mom' isn't what it used to be. *The Cut.* https://www.thecut.com/2022/05/post-pandemic-motherhood-anxiety.html

Pedersen, S. & Burnett, S. (2022) Women's use and abuse of the news media during the COVID-19 pandemic on mumsnet. *Digital Journalism*, *10* (6), 1098-1114. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1967768

Peterson, S. (2023). *Momfluenced: Inside the Maddening, Picture-Perfect World of Mommy Influencer Culture.* Beacon Press.

Proudfoot, S. (2021, November 9). The pandemic is breaking parents. *Macleans*. https://macleans.ca/society/health/the-pandemic-is-breaking-parents/

Preece, J. & Maloney-Krichmar, D. (2005, July 1). Online Communities: Design, Theory, and Practice, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *10* (4). https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00264.x

Radomski, A., Cloutier, P., Polihronis, C., Gardner, W., Pajer, K., Sheridan, N., Sundar, P., & Cappelli, M. (2022). Parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic: The sociodemographic and mental health factors associated with maternal caregiver strain. *Families, Systems, & Health, 40*(1), 79–86. https://doi.org/10.1037/fsh0000638

Rheingold, H. (1993). The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

Stacks, D. W. (2017). *Primer of public relations research*. Guilford Publications.

Stanoevska-Slabeva, K. & Schmid, B.F. (2001). "A typology of online communities and community supporting platforms," *Proceedings of the 34th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, Maui, HI, USA, pp. 10 pp.-, doi: 10.1109/HICSS.2001.927041.

Toronto Foundation. (2022). Toronto Social Capital Study. https://torontofoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Toronto-Foundation-Social-Capital-Report.pdf

The primal scream line. (2020, December 18). *New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/18/parenting/primal-scream.html

Wavrock, D., Schellenberg, G., and Schimmele, C. (2022). Canadians' use of the Internet and digital technologies before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistics Canada. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202200400004-eng

Welbourne, J.L., Blanchard, A.L., and Wadsworth, M.B. (2013). Motivations in virtual health communities

and their relationship to community, connectedness and stress. Computers in Human Behavior: 29(1): 129-139. https://doi-org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1016/j.chb.2012.07.024

Wellman, B. (2001) Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalized Networking. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*: 22(2), 227–252. DOI:10.1111/1468-2427.00309

Wenner Moyer, M. (2022, January 20). COVID parenting has passed the point of absurdity. *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2022/01/covid-parenting-challenges-stress/621322/

Westman, J. (1998). *Society's stake in parenthood*. University of Wisconsin – Madison. https://parenthood.library.wisc.edu/Westman/Westman-Society.html

Wilson, C., and Stock, J. (2021). “Social media comes with good and bad sides, doesn't it?” A balancing act of the benefits and risks of social media use by young adults with long-term conditions. *Health (London):* 25 (5):515-534. doi: 10.1177/13634593211023130

Appendices

Appendix A: Clearance certificate from REB

McMaster University | Research Ethics Board

McMaster Research Ethics Board

Sep/26/2023

Principal Investigator:
Supervisor: Dr. Terry Flynn
Student Principal Investigator: Ms. Paris Semansky
Applicant: Paris Semansky
Project Title: Pandemic pal or problem? Digital community for pandemic parents
MREB#: 6609

Dear Researcher(s)

Thank you for sending me your response. Your clarifications and revisions address the prior concerns that were raised. As such, I am approving your research protocol for ethics clearance. A certificate of clearance will be issued shortly. In the interim, however, you are free to start conducting your study immediately.

All the best in your research.

Dr. Tara La Rose

Dr. Tara La Rose, MREB Chair
Associate Professor
School of Social Work
Faculty of Social Sciences
905-525-9140 x23785
larostl@mcmaster.ca

Dr. Brian Detlor, MREB Vice-Chair
Professor
Information Systems
DeGroote School of Business
905-525-9140 x23949
detlorb@mcmaster.ca

Dr. Niko Yiannakoulias, MREB Vice-Chair
Associate Professor
School of Earth, Environment & Society
Faculty of Science
905-525-9140 x20117
yiannan@mcmaster.ca

Appendix B: Full Survey

Study Title: Pandemic pal or problem? Digital community for pandemic parents

Survey Preamble

This study is being conducted by Paris Semansky, student investigator, under the supervision of Dr. Terry Flynn, faculty supervisor in the Masters of Communications Management program at McMaster University.

The purpose of the study is to better understand the experience of digital community for parents with young children during the first two years of the pandemic. Information gathered during this study will be written up as a research paper. People participating in this study must:

1. Have lived in Ontario at some point between March 2020 and March 2022; and
2. Have at least one child who was 10 years old as of March 2020, and
3. Use at least one kind of social media (could include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and others).

The survey should take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

To learn more about this study, particularly in terms of any risks or harms associated with the study, how

confidentiality and anonymity will be handled, withdrawal procedures, how to obtain information about the study's results, how to find helpful resources should any questions or tasks make you uncomfortable or upset etc., please read the Letter of Information.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board 6609.

If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone 1-(905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
E-mail: mreb@mcmaster.ca

Survey Consent

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study.

Having read the above preamble, I understand that by clicking the "Yes" button below, I agree to take part in this study.

YES I agree to participate in this study.
NO I do not agree to participate in this study.

Survey Screening Questions

Q1: Did you live in Ontario at some point during March 2020 to March 2022?

If yes, continue to next screening question.

If no: Thank you for your interest in this research.

Q2: Do you have child(ren) who were 10-years-old or younger as of March 2022?

If yes, continue to next screening question.

If no: Thank you for your interest in this research.

Q3: During the period of March 2020 to March 2022, did you use – in any way – any social media sites (could include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and others)?

If yes, continue to survey.

If no: Thank you for your interest in this research.

Survey Questions

Q1. There are many things you can do with social media. In the first two years of the pandemic – March

2020 to March 2022 – how were you using social media? Click all that apply.

to lessen the pandemic isolation

provide information

parenting advice

activities for kids

provide distraction

recipes

humour

other [write-in]

Q2. What social media and networks did you use between March 2020 and March 2022? Click all that apply.

Facebook

Facebook Groups

Facebook Messenger

Instagram

MarcoPolo

Reddit

TikTok

Twitter

WhatsApp

YouTube

Other [write in]

Q4. Did you join or re-join any social media platforms during the pandemic?

Yes/no

If yes, go to Q5.

If no, go to Q6.

Q5. Which platforms did you join? Click all that apply.

Facebook

Facebook Groups

Facebook Messenger

Instagram

MarcoPolo

Reddit

TikTok

Twitter

WhatsApp

YouTube

Other [write in]

Q6. Did you leave any social media platforms during the pandemic?

Yes/ no

If yes, go to Q7 and Q8.

If no, go to Q9.

Q7. Which platforms did you leave? Click all that apply.

Facebook

Facebook Groups

Facebook Messenger

Instagram

MarcoPolo

Reddit

TikTok

Twitter

WhatsApp

YouTube

Other [write in]

Q8. Why did you leave those platforms? [for each that they left]

[write in]

Q9: For each of the social media platforms you used, how often did you use them, on average?

Facebook

Multiple times a day Once a day Once a week

Once a month Not at all/ did not use Prefer not to say

Facebook Groups

Multiple times a day Once a day Once a week

Once a month Not at all/ did not use Prefer not to say

Facebook Messenger

Multiple times a day Once a day Once a week

Once a month Not at all/ did not use Prefer not to say

Instagram

Multiple times a day Once a day Once a week

Once a month Not at all/ did not use Prefer not to say

MarcoPolo

Multiple times a day Once a day Once a week

Once a month Not at all/ did not use Prefer not to say

Reddit

Multiple times a day Once a day Once a week

Once a month Not at all/ did not use Prefer not to say

TikTok

Multiple times a day Once a day Once a week

Once a month Not at all/ did not use Prefer not to say

Twitter

Multiple times a day Once a day Once a week

Once a month Not at all/ did not use Prefer not to say

WhatsApp

Multiple times a day Once a day Once a week

Once a month Not at all/ did not use Prefer not to say

YouTube

Multiple times a day Once a day Once a week

Once a month Not at all/ did not use Prefer not to say

Q10. Thinking of how often you were on social media, did it increase or decrease during the first two years of the pandemic, on average?

Use increased significantly Increased a little Stayed about the same Decreased a little Use decreased significantly Prefer not to say

Q11. How did you use social media? Click all that apply

Comment

Like

Share

"Lurk"

Direct Message

Personal messaging

Posted photos and captions

Other [write in]

Q12. Were there any accounts or influencers you found helpful during the pandemic? [write in]

If yes, go to Q13.

If no, go to Q14.

Q13. What did you find helpful about them?

[write in]

Q14. Were there any accounts or influencers you unfollowed?

[write in]

If yes, go to Q15.

If no, go to Q16.

Q15. Why did you unfollow them?

[write in]

Q16. To what degree to you feel supported in your parenting by your use of social media overall?

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

Q17. To what degree did you feel supported in your parenting through each platform? Choose as many as you used.

Facebook

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

Facebook Groups

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

Facebook Messenger

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

Instagram

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

MarcoPolo

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

Reddit

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

TikTok

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

Twitter

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

WhatsApp

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

YouTube

Very supported, supported, neither supported or not supported, not supported, not at all supported Prefer not to say

Other [write in]

Q18. Did your experience of digital community impact your experience of parenting in a pandemic?

[write in]

Q19. Rate what level of trust you had in the following as of March 2020?

Parenting influencers across platform

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Other parents on social media

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Mainstream media social media accounts

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Professional parenting accounts

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Small businesses

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Local businesses

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Large businesses

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Federal government

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Provincial government

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Municipal/ local government

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Mainstream media

Very trusted a little trusted neither trusted or untrusted a little untrusted very untrusted Prefer not to say

Q19. By March 2022, had your level of trust increased or decreased with the following groups?

Parenting influencers across platform

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Other parents on social media

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Mainstream media social media accounts

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Professional parenting accounts

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Small businesses

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Local businesses

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Large businesses

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Federal government

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Provincial government

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Municipal/ local government

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Mainstream media

Significantly increased A little increased Neither increased or decreased A little decreased Significantly decreased Prefer not to Say

Thank you for your participation. That concludes the part of the survey about your experience of digital community during the pandemic. The next section includes questions related to personal demographics, which will provide insight into differences and commonalities among and between different groups of parents.

Demographic info

Q22: How do you identify your gender?

[write in response]

Q23: During March 2020 to March 2022, what best describes your martial status?

married, partnered but not married, widowed, divorced, separated, never married, prefer not to say

Q24: For the majority of the period of March 2020 to March 2022, did you:

Work from home

Leave your home for work

Q25: During March 2020 to March 2022, did you experience any increased financial strain?

Yes/ no

Q26: How do you identify?

Black African (including Afro-Caribbean, African-Canadian descent)

East Asian (including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese descent)

Latino (including Latin American, Hispanic descent)

Middle Eastern (including Arab, Persian, West Asian descent, e.g. Afghan, Egyptian, Iranian, etc.)

South Asian (including South Asian descent, e.g. East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Indo-Caribbean, etc.)

Southeast Asian (including Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, other Southeast Asian descent)

White European descent

Another ethnicity [write in]

Q27: What category most accurately reflects your take-home household income during the first two years of the pandemic?

Under $40,000

$41,000 and $80,000

$81,000 to $160,000

$161,000 to $300,000

More than $301,000

Q28: As of today, how many of your children are 3 years old and under?

[write in]

Q29: How many are 4 to 6 years old?

[write in]

Q30: How many are 7 to 10 years old?

[write in]

Q31: How many are over 10 years old?

[write in]

Q32. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

[open-ended text box]