The Virtual Village: Making Connections in Online Postpartum Support Groups

MUMS — Mapping and Understanding Mothers' Social-Networks

Background & Research Design

Connecting with other parents and healthcare workers is important to new parents during the postpartum period. Connecting and sharing experiences with other parents helps to increase confidence in caring for their newborns, feeling normal, and feeling less isolated. Postpartum isolation increased during the COVID-19 pandemic due to decreased in-person connections and social support. Online postpartum support emerged as an alternative way to address this situation. Our research examined this new way of conducting synchronous video conferencing experiences of parents. We facilitated seven sessions with 37 parents and interviewed 19 participants using feminist poststructuralism and socio-materialism for data analysis. The camera and microphone shaped a unique virtual postpartum discourse of connecting.

Findings

Connecting Through the Microphone

- All participants said that sharing and listening to each others' stories gave them a sense of comfort, reduced isolation, & made them feel more connected.
- Connecting was also about responding to other parents to help them feel supported and normal.
- Muting helped to hear conversations but it also changed how stories were shared. While it ensured reduced noise, it also interfered with the way parents could quickly and easily respond to each other.
- Adding responsive comments during the online session was harder compared to in-person discussions. Most parents unmuted only when they felt they had something substantial to say. Only a few participants utilized the chat function or emojis to facilitate rapid responses. Turn taking became the norm.

"Having the opportunity to hear someone else and that they're going through the same experience, I remember someone told me that it was just normal, it's okay whatever you're doing its fine."

Connecting Through the Camera

- Zoom provided parents with the choice to be seen or not seen. Personal comfort, group norms, and other parents in the sessions influenced this decision.
- Most parents valued having cameras on. Seeing others interact with babies, being comfortable, smiling, breastfeeding, or doing chores made the online postpartum experience easier, thus fostering confidence and reducing isolation.
- Having the camera enabled participants to read facial expressions and body language and overall contributed to positive feelings of connection and presence..
- Having the camera off made many participants feel uneasy as they thought it was creepy and risky.
- Some participants were not comfortable being seen on camera. However, would put their cameras on to make others feel comfortable.

"Seeing other moms pick up their baby or get a toy to entertain their baby or whatever just sort of makes you feel connected."
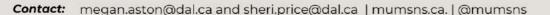
"I'm not comfortable breastfeeding in front of people, so I had my video off"

Conclusion & Implications

- Connecting virtually requires participants to purposefully engage with the camera and microphone.
- Facilitators need to understand how technology including cameras and microphones facilitate connections.
- Facilitators and participants need to discuss the use of tools to support online connections such as the camera, microphone, chat space, and emojis.

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The Virtual Village: Perceptions of Online Safety in Postpartum Support Groups

Background & Research Design

Virtual spaces can help new parents connect, feel supported, gather information, and combat isolation. However, being online may also bring safety risks such as, judgement, bullying, and threats to privacy. This study explored parents' experiences in videoconference (Zoom) postpartum support groups focused on how technology and social discourses affected participation. We used feminist poststructural and socio-material methodologies. Thirty-seven parents with babies from 0-12 months old participated in the sessions and 19 of them were interviewed individually about their experiences. Parents described how they interacted and positioned themselves to feel comfortable online. Most parents were cautious about sharing personal information at first. Virtual safety encompassed feelings of support, inclusion, security, and freedom from judgement.

Findings

Virtual Stranger Danger

- Parents expressed concerns about "stranger danger" online which constructed the meaning of safety in the virtual space.
- It is difficult to feel connected when participants have their cameras and microphones off.
- Safety concerns influenced parents' use of camera (showing self or baby) & sharing personal information.

"People can be creepy on the internet"

"You don't know who is behind the screen"

Establishing Safety

- Small group size and skilled facilitators contributed to a feeling of safety online.
- Parents highlighted the safety features of Zoom, included the ability to easily exit the space or turn their camera off if they felt uncomfortable.
- Feeling safe in one's own home was a benefit of the virtual environment

"I'm in my own environment where I feel safe and secure"

Fear of Judgement

- Parents feared judgement due to past negative online experiences, in asynchronous chat rooms
- Compared to in-person meetings, many parents said they felt virtual sessions were less judgemental as you could control what you visually shared and there were fewer social pressures.

"They're getting me, from the shoulders up, I feel less judged"

"There are some hateful things that people can write"

Conclusion and Implications

- Feeling safe was a significant factor in how participants experienced online interactions.
- Perceptions of feeling safe were influenced by a socially constructed discourse of online safety
- Being online may increase or decrease feelings of safety.
- We need to assess individuals experiences of safety interacting online and from their home .
- Facilitators need to be mindful of how technology both helps and hinders feelings of safety.
- Facilitators need to familiarize themselves with the tools and ways of being online that enable a feeling of safety.
- Facilitators and participants should develop rules for group engagement in the virtual space (cameras and microphones).

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The Virtual Village: Zoom Etiquette in Postpartum Support Groups

Background & Research Design

The popularity of virtual spaces for postpartum parents to connect, support each other, and exchange information has increased, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study investigated virtual postpartum support sessions conducted through Zoom to gain valuable insights into the impact of technology on postpartum support and learning for parents. Seven virtual sessions with 37 participants were conducted for parents caring for babies aged 0-12 months, and then 19 participants were interviewed to gather insights into their session experiences. Sociomaterial and feminist poststructural methodologies were used to guide the research process and analysis. Normalized practices were constructed through a discourse of Zoom etiquette during the postpartum sessions. How parents spoke was highly regulated through the mute button and the camera. The following three themes demonstrate how parents used their agency and engaged with each other that both supported and challenged Zoom etiquette. "There's an etiquette to Zoom that's not really present in person"

Findings

Minimizing Disruptions

- Parents used the mute button to minimize background noise out of respect for others (Eg
- Parents were particularly concerned about babies making noise
- The mute button allowed parents to stay engaged online while multitasking (eg. caring for baby and folding laundry

"I love the mute button; it make it so you have zero bad feelings about the level of noise your child is making"

Turn Taking

- Many parents missed the spontaneity of in-person conversations.
- Parents valued orderly, 'turn-taking' to ensure everyone spoke
- The mute button forced turn-taking practices. Parents had to unmute before speaking and did this only when they had something significant to contribute.
- Most participants did not use chat or reaction buttons although they were encouraged to do that.

"I use the mute button to have some respect"

Zoom Etiquette Constructs Conversations

- The format of Zoom contributed to a more formal style of communication.
- Parents said Zoom did not support relaxed and spontaneous discussions.
- One-on-one interactions or side conversations were not possible.
- The majority of parents wanted to keep their cameras on so they could see others in the group to facilitate genuine connections

"I think when you're in person you can make little side conversations with people and that's tricky online"

Conclusion and Implications

- Zoom technology impacts how parents communicate and interact online; ultimately constructing a Zoom etiquette.
- Mute buttons and cameras can both facilitate and disrupt conversations.
- Facilitators should discuss how mute buttons and cameras can be used to facilitate conversations.
- Facilitators should encourage using chat, emoji reactions, microphone, (re)actions on camera, and post-session socializing.

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