

Babycenter.com: New parent behavior in an online community

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Abstract

Technology is playing an increasingly bigger role in parent education. Unfortunately we know little about how parents use online resources. To gain a better understanding of the ways in which new parents use an online community in their parenting, we conducted a content analysis of one popular parenting Web site www.babycenter.com that allows parents to join a cohort of parents with children of the same age. Analyses revealed that parents participated in both individual activities, such as journal writing, and group activities, such as posting and responding to questions on a discussion board. Parents were primarily seeking information about normative development. However, the majority of parents' activities involved connecting with others. Analyses also revealed that a small number of parents accounted for the majority of the online activity.

Keywords: parenting, virtual behavior, virtual community

Introduction

New parents are concerned about raising their babies and want information about child-rearing. In particular, parents seek out information specific to their family situation, including effective parenting techniques specific to their infant's needs. New parents tend to get most of their parenting information by talking with friends and family, with information from family members usually coming from their own mothers and fathers. Parents also refer to books, parenting education classes, media, and the Internet (Radey and Randolph 2009).

Technology is playing an increasingly bigger role in how parents obtain information about parenting. The Internet is a useful tool for parents seeking parenting information because of its convenience and anonymity (Romano 2007; Szwajcer et al. 2005). Not only do new parents turn to the Internet for alternative sources of parenting information, but they also use the Internet to seek guidance and support in their parenting roles (Madge and O'Connor 2006). Online, parents give and receive emotional support (Drenta and Moren-Cross 2005). They can share information about child-rearing, strategies, and advice with other parents. In particular, new parents have been found to turn to the Internet for support related to the developmental changes they observe in their infants. More specifically, parents use websites to connect with other parents and normalize the parenting experiences they are having (Hall and Irvine 2009).

There is evidence that online parent education materials can be effective. Parenting information and social support found on the Internet has the potential to empower parents (Madge and O'Connor 2006). Access to online parenting resources has been found to be associated with increased confidence in parenting ability and knowledge of child development (Hudson et al. 2003; Na and Chia 2008). The Internet can also provide a space for parents to reflect upon their parenting efficacy (Hall and Irvine 2009). Further, the Internet can create a virtual community of parents and allow parents to find others who are like themselves. Na and Chia (2008) found that parents who had access to an online program felt they had adequate knowledge of child development and felt more confident they were achieving their goals of becoming successful parents, compared with parents who did not access the program.

To gain a better understanding of the ways in which new parents use these virtual resources and communities in their parenting role, we conducted a content analysis of one website that allows parents to join a cohort of parents with children of the same age. We explored parents' activities in this virtual community.

Methods

Description of website

The focus of this study was babycenter.com www.babycenter.com, one of many popular commercial websites for parents (Romano 2007). Babycenter.com was the focus for a few key reasons. First, parents mostly use search engines to seek parenting information (Bernhardt and Felter 2004). In fact, Nichols and colleagues (2009) found that more than half of parents reported using Google Search to look for information regarding children's learning and development. Babycenter.com is one of the highest ranking websites when any keywords related to baby or parenting are used for searching (Rashley 2005). Second, parents report that when seeking information online, information on specific stages of pregnancy and child development is most useful (Bernhardt and Felter 2004). Babycenter.com is organized in this way, according to

pregnancy and development stages. Third, babycenter.com provides parenting resources as well as opportunities for social connections and support, a key element of what parents seek online (Stevens, Wallston, and Hamilton 2011a). Lastly, babycenter.com has drawn attention from researchers in various fields such as nursing and health (Bernhardt and Felter 2004; Cline and Decker 2011; Lamp and Howard 1999; Stevens et al. 2011a and 2011b), social psychology (Blanchard 2008; Blanchard and Markus 2007), feminism (Rashley 2005; Taylor and Wallace 2012), consumer research (Alon and Brunel 2006), and organization studies (Rossett and Donello 2007). However, new parents' activities on the website have not been considered from a family studies perspective. The current study is designed to fill this gap.

In addition to information about parenting based on children's developmental stages, babycenter.com includes advertisements and provides links to Internet shopping malls. It includes a virtual community that is run by parent members. The community is a virtual space for parents to share their experiences and ideas with other parents, and to express themselves using personal blogs.

To share experiences and ideas, parents can also join "groups" on the site, which are virtual communities of parents with similar interests or experiences. For example, popular groups in the community include Birth Clubs, Parenting Advice, and Baby Names. Birth Clubs, the focus of this study, are communities for parents with a child who was or will be born during a specific month and year. It is important to study Birth Clubs because they provide virtual spaces for parents to discuss common interests and concerns, during pregnancy and after birth, with parents who are having similar experiences with children of similar ages (Romano 2007). At the time of this study there were 132 Birth Clubs representing birth cohorts from January 2000 to December 2010. The number of members in the Birth Clubs of the most recent three years' varied from about 1,500 to 12,000. Many parents enrolled in Birth Clubs before their babies' births. In addition to participating in Birth Clubs, parents can have their own personal blogs which are "a personal journal on the web" (Cohen and Krishnamurthy 2006, 615). In blogs, parents can write journal entries, upload photos to private photo albums, and have links to their friends' blogs, groups, and photo clubs.

Sample

For this study, we randomly selected a Birth Club with members who were parents of children six to seven months of age (members are referred to as "parents") at the time of data collection. Because this was a sample of new parents, these parents were at a critical time for seeking information and support. The Birth Club had approximately 7,000 parent members.

Within this Birth Club, we selected a random sample of seventy-five parents. In the Birth Club, there was an alphabetical list of all parents with a link to each parent's main profile page. We

selected every fortieth parent on the member list. To avoid getting a skewed sample, we selected thirty-four parents by starting with the letter A, an additional sixteen parents by starting with the letter M, and twenty-five more parents by starting with the letter P. In previous studies, scholars have argued that it was unnecessary to get permission to analyze a virtual community when a researcher used messages which were open to the public and preserved the anonymity of the messages (Brady and Guerin 2010; King 1996; Reid 1996). Thus, we did not deem it necessary to receive consent from parents.

While there was no clear indicator of parent gender, in the posts we explored, only one parent stated that he was a father. After a review of profile pictures and communications, the other seventy-four parents appeared to be mothers. For example, parents talked about their own physical status during pregnancy and their relationships with their husbands. This is not surprising given that in this female-dominated online environment, fathers often report feeling unsupported in their role as parents (Fletcher and St. George 2011; Hall and Irvine 2008; Madge and O'Connor 2006) and would thus be less likely to engage with the community.

Because age was not listed on profile pages, we used one post in the Birth Club to identify the age range of parent members. The post was titled "Survey for those who have time!" and asked parents' name, birth date, current age, and other demographic information. Of the fifty-six parents who commented on the post, 12.5 percent were under 20 years of age, 69.6 percent were 20 to 30, and 17.9 percent were over 30 years of age.

Data

The blogs contained information about parents' profiles such as identifying images and virtual friends. As described above, blogs allowed parents to write journal entries and post their photos. The first page of a parent's blog was a profile page, which revealed personal information such as an identifying image or photo, or residential area. Parents could set the page to "private" so that the contents of the page were revealed only to "friends" of the blog owner. When a parent disclosed his or her profile (as opposed to keeping the page private), it was possible for anyone to see the parent's activities: communications the parent engaged in, journal writing, photos, and groups and photo clubs in which the parent participated. This enabled us to examine the types of communications parents engaged in, such as creating posts and commenting on others' posts. When a parent created a post or commented on others' posts, the activity section automatically kept a log of the communication, including a link to the original post. It kept a history of the last forty-four activities parents participated in. For example, if a parent commented on a post in the Birth Club, that parent's blog saved a link to that post, allowing one to review the original post and all related comments.

Content analysis

Content analysis is a useful method when the research is designed to describe the characteristics of communication (McMillan 2000). Because participation in a virtual community is a computer-mediated communication, content analysis is an appropriate method of analysis for the current study. Analyzing the content of a virtual community is essential to understanding the behaviors of individuals engaged with the virtual community (Chiu, Hsu, and Wang 2006).

As previously described, the data used in the current study were drawn from parents' blogs. Content analysis of blogs has been used to analyze the structure and themes of blogs as well as to examine individuals' motivations for using blogs (Herring et al. 2007). In the present study, we analyzed the content of individual parents' blogs to identify the types of personal information parents revealed and to explore parents' activities on the website.

The procedure of content analysis we conducted for this study is based on the coding protocol used in a study by Jones and colleagues (2008) investigating MySpace, a social networking website. The protocol includes identifying blog users' characteristics and images, communication habits, and blog contents. Then, coded information is presented by frequency. Following this protocol, we coded parents' blogs as follows. First, we distinguished parents' activities that were not part of participating in the Birth Club (individual activities) from their activities focused on engaging with other parents in the Birth Club (group activities). For individual activities, we analyzed the types of personal and socializing information parents exposed in their blogs. For group activities, we followed the link to each post or comment. Next, we coded each post or comment based on topic. After coding the topics of parents' posts and comments in the Birth Club, we grouped themes that emerged by subthemes and calculated the frequencies of themes and subthemes.

Results

Individual activities

All of the parents in the sample made their identifying image public. However, about 45 percent of parents used a drawing provided by the site as their identifying image; 24 percent of parents used a family photo such as mother with baby (or children); 12 percent used a self-photo; another 12 percent used a baby's photo including ultrasound photo of a fetus; and 2.7 percent used a photographic image such as a candle. Three profile pages had a technical error, so the pages were not visible.

Among the seventy-five parents, only fifteen parents did not disclose their profiles. Sixty parents who disclosed their profiles rarely engaged in individual activities: only 21.7 percent ($n = 13$)

used their journals and the frequency of writing in the journals was very low (range: 1-5 journal entries), except for one parent who wrote nineteen journal entries. Some parents had “friends” who were members with common interests. Some friends were members of the same groups, such as the Birth Club or Baby Names. When a parent enrolled friends, friends could comment on the parent’s photos or journal entries and send notes to each other. In addition, friends could access each other’s blogs, which were private pages. The number of friends ranged from one to eighty-one (mean = 9.9; median = 3) among the twenty parents (out of sixty parents) who had at least one friend. Another feature of the site allowed parents to send and receive message icons (“pass a note”). There were nine icons with different meanings: “thank you,” “congrats,” “great idea,” “you rock,” “so sweet,” “just a note,” “I can relate,” “great photos,” and “laugh out loud.” In the full sample (n = 75), forty-one parents received notes, ranging from one note to seventy-three notes (mean = 7.3; median = 3).

Group activities

In the Birth Club, there were 60,392 posts and 779,718 comments to the posts. Consistent with these numbers, in our subsample (sixty parents who disclosed their profiles), commenting on others’ posts was much more common than creating posts. Twenty-seven parents (45.0 percent) created at least one post in the Birth Club. The number of posts created by these twenty-seven parents ranged from one to nine (mean = 2.3; median = 1). In contrast, forty-six parents (76.7 percent) commented on at least one post in the birth club. The number of times parents commented on a post ranged from one to forty-four (mean = 14.0; median = 10). However, it was not clear whether there was a parent who commented more than forty-four times because forty-four was the maximum number of activities kept in the activity history. Among the parents who disclosed their profiles, thirteen parents (21.7 percent) were not active in any of these group activities. Among the parents who engaged in group activities, the extent of their participation in these group activities was demonstrated by inclusion into one of six categories based on their numbers of posts and comments (see Table 1). Approximately 47 percent of parents were engaged in both posting and commenting, and about 32 percent of parents were engaged only in commenting.

Table 1. Parent participation in group activities

	<i>Number of Posts Median (range)</i>	<i>Number of Comments Median (Range)</i>	
Active			%
Non Active	0 (0)	0 (0)	21.7

Some Posts/Some Comments	1 (1 to 2)	1 (0 to 10)	16.7
Some Posts/Active Comments	1 (1 to 2)	35.5 (11 to 44)	16.7
Active Posts/Active Comments	4 (3 to 9)	33 (11 to 44)	8.3
Active Posts/Some Comments	4 (3 to 9)	6 (5 to 7)	5.0
Active Comments	0 (0)	13 (11 to 25)	11.7
Some Comments	0 (0)	1.5 (1 to 10)	20.0
Total			100.0 [†]

Note: [†]Sample reflects only participants who self-disclosed.

[Table 1 Summary: Parents' participation in group activities based on posts and comments]

Using the group activities of posting or commenting, parents shared their child-care situations, asked other members' advice, and encouraged each other through confirming that they had similar experiences and difficulties. The most popular topic for discussion among parents was pregnancy and labor (see Table 2 for themes and subthemes). In relation to pregnancy and labor, parents were most concerned about whether their physical and emotional changes were normal, and they asked other parents whether they were having similar experiences. Sometimes, they also wanted to confirm doctors' advice with other parents.

Issues related to the baby were also common. Parents especially wanted practical advice that they could use to solve problems. For example, parents shared their experiences with successful breastfeeding and described their experiences in detail. Table 2 reveals some example questions and parents' comments in response. Parents also exchanged opinions about personal and common issues such as a mother's relationship with the baby's father or change of body shape. They gathered information about baby names using a poll and asked other members' opinions about the name they chose. Parents also participated in more general socializing with other members such as sharing information about themselves and their babies, and interesting stories or photos. Several other topics emerged as well, such as general baby care, health of baby and mother, and baby's development.

Discussion and implications

The present study revealed ways in which new parents used and participated in an online community. In general, the parents in the study rarely engaged in individual activities. A few parents accounted for the majority of activity. Some parents used their blogs to express

themselves, but there was not much communication among parents through the individual activities. This might reflect parents' motivations for using a virtual community for parenting. There are other popular blogging websites for self-expression, such as Facebook, thus blogging in a parental virtual community might be less attractive for parents who use other social networking services. In addition, many parents feel comfortable using a virtual community because of its anonymity (Romano 2007; Szwajcer et al. 2005). Individual activities would not be preferable for those parents wanting anonymous participation.

Using group activities, parents shared their experiences, information, and feelings related to raising their babies. The information that the parents were seeking and were interested in was primarily about normative topics (e.g., feeding) rather than crisis situations. The most popular topics for parents were pregnancy and labor and nursing babies. Because those topics were not about specific family situations but were general concerns, the parents could give and receive practical advice in their parenting role without sacrificing privacy. Parents were more engaged in commenting on others' posts than creating original posts. Posts most often focused on asking for advice and other parents' opinions about certain situations, while comments tended to be simply about sharing experiences. By sharing their common experiences, parents could give and receive support and knowledge (Madge and O'Connor 2006; Pitts 2004). In addition, this helps to normalize parents' experiences.

One of the most common challenges when developing a professional parent education website is how to attract parents to the website. As this study revealed, a large number of parents join commercial websites. However, the information parents get from commercial websites is mostly from other parents, not from experts (Madge and O'Connor 2006). Future research should focus on how family educators can engage with parents and help them find efficient supports through existing websites.

A virtual community of parents is easy for parents to engage with, when they may be reluctant to participate in face-to-face education or support groups. Unlike face-to-face education, a virtual community does not require active participation or exposing personal information to gain support (Brady and Guerin 2010; Herman et al. 2005). In addition, parents who have little support from their families and friends can benefit from virtual communities (Madge and O'Connor 2006). As our study revealed, a large number of parents are engaging in virtual communities of parents even though they may be passive participants. If family educators can engage with virtual communities such as babycenter.com, they will be able to support parents who have been marginalized from face-to-face support networks.

Participation of family educators in virtual communities will also enhance the quality of parenting resources and support. Many parents using virtual resources expressed their concern about the trustworthiness of information provided by commercial parenting websites and look for

information from experts (Bernhardt and Felter 2004). In addition, previous research indicated that interactions in virtual communities may increase the quantity of knowledge but not the quality (Chiu et al. 2006). Resources provided by family educators having no conflict of interest could be a reliable, high-quality source of information for parents leading to changes or improvement in parenting practices.

There are limitations to this study. First, it must be recognized that just a few parents accounted for most of the activities. Because the information about members' passive participation such as reading others' posts or comments is unavailable, it was not clear whether or not non-active parents accessed the Birth Club. Consequently, the activities described in the study may not represent the full range of activities of parents who engaged in but did not contribute to the community. Nevertheless, the results of the current study may still reflect what parents expect from the Birth Club because the active members of a virtual community tend to influence other members (Blanchard and Markus 2007) and generate norms and expectations in the virtual community (Rashley 2005; Taylor and Wallace 2012). Future research using survey methods is needed to investigate the impact of using a virtual community on parenting behaviors and parenting efficacy for those parents who are active participants and those who are passive participants.

Second, some parenting websites are more value-oriented than babycenter.com (Blanchard and Markus 2007; Rashley 2005). As a result, parents using other parenting websites might participate differently than parents on babycenter.com, may have different characteristics, and may have different interests. Comparison between parenting websites (e.g., Blanchard and Markus 2007) is an important next step in expanding our understanding of new parents' use of virtual resources and communities.

A third limitation is that it is hard to know whether and in what ways fathers used the community. There are three possible explanations for a lack of information on fathers in this study: (1) they might participate in the community in passive ways, (2) our sample size was not large enough to randomly sample father participants, or (3) perhaps fathers do not participate in online communities such as this because such spaces have been found to not be welcoming to fathers (Fletcher and St. George 2011; Hall and Irvine 2008; Madge and O'Connor 2006). Future research is needed to explore fathers' use of virtual communities.

The current study is a necessary first step to understand how parents use virtual communities. Results of the current study will be a foundation for developing tools to assess the impact of virtual communities on parenting behavior and ultimately child outcomes. Longitudinal research will be beneficial for developing virtual communities that can keep parents engaged while providing adequate knowledge and support. For example, the Birth Club we investigated is still active. Studies examining the change in parents' participation in such groups as their child

develops will improve our ability to facilitate viable virtual communities for parent education and support.

Comparative studies across cultures are also required. Virtual communities reflect cultural attitudes and norms of parenting (Rashley 2005). Babycenter.com has launched approximately twenty international websites with very similar structures. Cross-cultural research of parents' usage of virtual communities will help family educators become culturally competent in supporting diverse families.

In conclusion, this study provides a glimpse into parents' experience online with one of many virtual communities of parents. The study highlights parents' interest in specific parenting topics using the community and allows us to identify the topics parents most want information on. Through understanding the ways in which parents engage with existing websites, we can gather information to better develop websites to support parents in their parenting roles.

Table 2. Topics of group activities

Themes/Subthemes	Post Example	n (%)	Comment Example	n (%)
Pregnancy and labor	Feeling of nausea during the day and vomiting during the evening.	25 (39.1)	Mine seems to come on strong in the afternoons.	192 (30.1)
Baby				
Baby (mother) sleeping	Help! Will my LO ever sleep again?	6 (9.4)	Same thing here... I have no idea why.	23 (3.6)
Breastfeeding	I don't want to breastfeeding anymore.	3 (4.7)	Breastfeeding at first is hard...	31 (4.9)
Baby feeding (general)	My DD refuses to eat... Were you able to coax your baby to eat again?	1 (1.6)	You could try having her in more of a sitting position while feeding her.	14 (2.2)
Baby's urinating and diaper use	How many diapers your newborn use a day?	1 (1.6)	I swear I changed 10 diapers last night!	6 (0.9)
Baby care (general) ^a	My baby fell from bassinet.	-	You need to get that baby to the hospital ASAP.	48 (7.5)

Baby's health ^a	My LO recently started having problems with pooping.	-	When babies get older their intestines can hold more so they will poop less often.	13 (2.0)
Baby's development ^a	How much did your baby weigh at his/her 2 month?	-	My LO was 12.5 at two months.	13 (2.0)
Baby's crying ^a	I feel bad for my neighbors for just letting him cry but I don't know what to do.	-	Swaddle and put in a boppy pillow. Works almost every time for me.	1 (0.2)
Parents				
Relationship with baby's father	DH was so rude to me whole time and wouldn't quit complaining ...	3 (4.7)	DH was a little insensitive the other day when DS wasn't feeling well.	12 (1.9)
Weight, body shape	How much weight have you lost after giving birth?	3 (4.7)	I was 172 lbs now I weight 150 lbs.	18 (2.8)
Sexual activities	Anyone else miss sex?	2 (3.1)	DH is anxious but I'm ok to wait a few still.	15 (2.4)
Family	I may very well kill my mother. I have had to deal with the following...	1 (1.6)	Same with mine. She says give me her every time she's crying.	17 (2.7)
Mother's health ^a	Have you gotten your period yet?	-	I breastfeed and pump only, and no actual period.	12 (1.9)
Baby's sex	Who has tried the Chinese gender predictor?	2 (3.1)	4/5 said I'm having a boy.	12 (1.9)
Baby's name	I haven't had a chance to juggle boy names. What did you all choose?	2 (3.1)	I have thought of names my whole life and now I'm like...	23 (3.6)

Social interaction with members	I wonder how you came up with your screen name.	3 (4.7)	I still use my maiden name.	84 (13.2)
Other	My dog doesn't know how to act around children!	12 (18.8)	My dog is slowly learning that the baby comes first.	103 (16.2)
Total	64 (100)		637 (100)	

Note: ^a Category was found only in analysis of comment.

[Table 2 Summary: Topics of group activities and examples of posts and comments]

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