

Mothering on Facebook: Exploring the Privacy/Openness Paradox

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Abstract

To post or not to post photographs of children? Is it worth commenting on potentially controversial topics such as vaccinations and breastfeeding in a public forum or even a private group? Facebook offers mothers of young children a range of affordances that were unimaginable in a pre-social networking site (SNS) era, but at the same time presents a new set of dilemmas surrounding parenting in the digital domain. The SNS activity of parents brings the lives of children into online spaces in a way that builds community and social capital, but at the same time creates ethical tensions and raises a series of contemporary quandaries. Drawing upon data from a mixed-methods study, including an online survey of 117 mothers and semi-structured interviews with 17, this article examines Australian mothers' complex concerns around Facebook and the often-uneasy balance between the need for privacy and the benefits of openness, especially in relation to sharing information about children. The findings show that while issues around privacy were one of the most commonly cited downsides to Facebook use, mothers are becoming increasingly adept at negotiating ways to protect their privacy while enjoying the benefits of openness. These negotiation tactics demonstrate a strong awareness in mothers of young children of the social-political implications of parenting in the digital domain.

Keywords

Facebook, children, mothers, privacy, openness, social media, social networking sites

Introduction

The exponential rise of social networking sites (SNSs), and Facebook in particular, has inspired many scholars to investigate privacy issues and the affordances and risks of this popular and increasingly ubiquitous form of communication. This study considers these issues as experienced by some of Facebook's most enthusiastic adopters: mothers of young children. A recent nationally representative child health poll in the United States found that while 84% of mothers and 70% of fathers report using social media, over half of mothers (56%), compared with only 34% of fathers, discuss child health and parenting topics on social media (Child Health Evaluation and Research Unit, 2015). Mothers of babies, toddlers, and pre-schoolers are an under-researched but pertinent group to study because Facebook allows them to circumvent some of the social limitations and isolation that often come along with the demands of caring for young children. Facebook offers mothers instant access to friends, family, parenting advice, professional networks, entertainment, and diversion without having to leave the house or take up auditory space. The asynchronous nature of the medium makes it especially attractive to mothers, as they can drop in

and out of conversations and threads in-between tending to children. It is an efficient way to keep friends and family updated on life events and is increasingly becoming an essential modern tool for many in the same way that social constructivists such as Fischer (1992) have noted radio, cars, telephones, and television did in previous generations.

The attitudes of mothers (and parents) toward privacy issues, such as whether or not to post pictures of their children, are an under-researched area that could be better explored through qualitative data (Morris, 2014). A gorgeous baby photograph is a joy to share, but worries around digital footprints and maintaining control of images and information are factors that stop many mothers from fully embracing the Facebook experience. Community concerns around children

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and online privacy tend to focus on privacy concerns regarding children putting themselves at risk by sharing too much information about themselves, rather than children's privacy rights (which may be undermined by parents making pictures of their younger children available in public forums). One exception is Hiniker, Schoenebeck, and Kientz's (2016) study of family perspectives on household technology rules, which found children reported significant frustration with parents' over-sharing of content about them. Children said they found the content shared by their parents embarrassing and contributed to their online presence without their consent. These children were older (10–17 years) than those of the respondents in this research; however, the findings still provide valuable insights into potential future attitudes of both children and mothers to SNS sharing. Similarly, Kumar and Schoenebeck (2015) investigate the types of baby pictures shared by new mothers on Facebook and the factors considered during this process. They found the benefits of receiving validation through sharing baby photographs outweighed many concerns about over-sharing and creating a child's involuntary digital footprint. These findings are framed within the concept of privacy stewardship—"the responsibility parents take on when deciding what is appropriate to share about their children online and ensuring that (others) . . . respect and maintain the integrity of those rules" (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015, p. 9).

While few studies into mothers and SNS use exist, Internet-enabled communication more broadly has been noted for its potential to empower mothers (Cohen & Raymond, 2011; Lopez, 2009; Madge & O'Connor, 2006). A Microsoft study highlighted SNS' potential to support the needs of mothers and even combat postnatal depression (Morris, 2014), while Gibson (2013) notes that Facebook can help improve confidence and allow new mothers to maintain an identity aside from being a parent. Such observations are in line with research highlighting the benefits of SNS use and its relationship with social capital (e.g., Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Ellison, Gray, Lampe, & Fiore, 2014). Facebook's propensity to act as a conduit to strengthen and maintain relationships with weaker ties has also been established (Burke & Kraut, 2014; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

However, SNS use should not only be considered in terms of empowerment and limitless opportunities. Facebook comes with real risks to which new mothers and their children are particularly vulnerable—the professional risks associated with collapsed publics and overlapping social spheres at a time when connection with the workforce may be tenuous, for example, putting mothers' ability to provide for their children in jeopardy. One study looked at the impact of Facebook profiles on hiring decisions and found that while posts about sex, drugs, and alcohol did no favors for job-seekers of either sex, employers were more likely to hire male candidates who posted such information (Karl & Peluchette, 2009). Another study suggested a link

between self-disclosure and loneliness among female Facebook users (Al-Saggaf & Nielsen, 2014). Women are more likely than men to be subject to online abuse, and they perceive more risk online and report more privacy concerns than men (Hoy & Milne, 2010). They are also more likely than men to employ privacy-protective strategies such as keeping their profile private and un-friending contacts (Madden, 2012).

With much of the research into SNSs relying on US-based college students and employing quantitative methods, a gap exists for studies into demographically diverse groups to examine how SNSs are being incorporated into everyday life (Rains & Brunner, 2015). Acknowledging both the benefits and the hazards, this article seeks to transcend disciplines and debates about the worth or lack thereof of Facebook to explore the ways that mothers are negotiating its privacy risks—particularly in relation to their children—while leveraging its opportunities.

The Privacy–Openness Paradox

Literature looking at privacy and social networking has discussed a "privacy paradox," where users are willing to disclose personal information on SNSs despite professing to be concerned about privacy issues (e.g., Taddicken, 2013; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013). Interrogating the "privacy paradox," several studies show that users are not naive about their disclosure practices and are increasingly employing protective strategies to achieve desired levels of privacy (boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Dienlin & Trepte, 2014; Madden, 2012; Masur & Scharkow, 2016; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013). Privacy-protective behaviors that appear to be on the rise include self-censorship and data parsimony (Masur & Scharkow, 2016), profile "pruning" such as editing, un-friending and removing tags (Madden, 2012), and adjusting privacy settings (boyd & Hargittai, 2010). Paradoxically, the need to reveal more of oneself in order to reap the benefits of SNSs has been established (Ellison, Vitak, Steinfield, Gray, & Lampe, 2011; Vitak, 2012), along with the observation that people who participate more actively (posting comments and status updates) gain greater benefits than more passive users (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011; Stutzman, Vitak, Ellison, Gray, & Lampe, 2012).

This study reaffirms both that users are increasingly privacy-savvy and that those who are more active on Facebook enjoy greater benefits (however, more active users tended to experience more negative repercussions relating to privacy as well). It sheds light on the increasingly sophisticated way in which many mothers are now using privacy-protective strategies to allow access to the benefits of open discussion while mitigating the risk of revealing too much information to inappropriate audiences. It is this evolving balancing act between employing privacy-protective behaviors while exploring the possibilities presented by Facebook's vast network that is the crux of the privacy–openness paradox.

Methods

This article was developed from a broader project examining Australian mothers' behaviors and attitudes around Facebook. The original research was exploratory, examining a sample of Australian mothers of children younger than 5 years to ask why and how are they using Facebook, what they see as the benefits, and how they mitigate the downsides. A key theme that emerged was mothers' concerns around privacy versus the benefits of openness, transparency, and information-sharing in a fluid network, and that is the focus here. In particular, we ask what are the relationships between mothers' use of Facebook and the digital footprints of their young children, and what do mothers consider to be the impacts of sharing information about children. However, the digital footprint of young children is not considered solely through the act of sharing pictures, stories, and comments in a public space. This research found that mothers share much information about their children indirectly—through seeking advice on forums, for example—and employ negotiation tactics relating to a wide range of sharing and privacy issues, demonstrating a strong awareness of the social-political implications of parenting in the digital domain.

We employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a web-based survey with semi-structured interviews, in order to minimize the limitations of looking at quantitative or qualitative data alone. A reliance on quantitative survey data in SNS research has had the effect of an over-emphasis on features (which are frequently changed making research obsolete) rather than the way SNSs are being used and incorporated into everyday life (Rains & Brunner, 2015). We wanted to illuminate context and subjects' rationale with semi-structured interviews, using the quantitative survey data to identify and prioritize topics for discussion in the interviews, and provide perspective in a way that could not have been achieved via interviews alone. The project was approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Web-Based Survey

The SurveyMonkey questionnaire involved 19 questions developed by the authors, including 14 multiple-choice questions, three qualitative/text-based answers, and a section with various statements that respondents were asked if they agreed, disagreed, or neither agreed nor disagreed with. Questions covered topics such as time spent on Facebook, profile pictures, perceived benefits and pitfalls of Facebook use, preferred activities, who they enjoyed interacting with most on Facebook, and types of posts that they were unlikely to make (see tables for selected results).

The recruitment strategy leveraged Facebook's networking capabilities, combining aspects of convenience sampling and snowball sampling to allow access to the most readily available subjects in a time- and cost-effective way. While

convenience sampling is sometimes criticized for its lack of purpose, or for not being strategic enough (Gray, 2014), the researchers targeted mothers specifically, and also introduced snowball-sampling techniques, to mitigate against such concerns. Initially, a blurb, image, and link to the survey were posted on the Raising Children Network Facebook page, and while this garnered an initial small sample of responses, more were required and the researchers decided to utilize their own networks. Targeting mothers of young children, as well as educators and health professionals who work with mothers and children, we asked selected contacts to forward the post on to potentially interested groups and individuals within their networks; the link was subsequently shared on at least five community and parenting-related Facebook group pages. The online survey responses were collected over 3 months, and 117 valid responses were received. People responded through a Facebook post (84 responses were received) and an associated Weblink (33).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Online survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they were willing to take part in a 20-min semi-structured interview, with 45 people agreeing to one. They were emailed further information, with a resulting 17 semi-structured interviews conducted, producing a total of 8 hr of recorded material. Interviews were set up according to what was comfortable and convenient for participants. Nine were conducted via telephone and eight were conducted face-to-face.

Of the 17 interviewees, 2 were known to the lead researcher (one a former colleague and another a former university acquaintance). This raised some questions about the ethical issues involved in using friends as subjects; while it can provide greater frankness and depth to responses, subjects may feel pressured to participate (Brewis, 2014). In this case, the researcher had not been in close contact with either of the known subjects for more than a decade and the prior relationship did not have a significant influence on how the interview was conducted or what the subject revealed.

A list of 15 (mostly open-ended) questions was compiled by the authors, based on key themes and issues identified by online survey respondents. Interviewees were encouraged to explain how their Facebook use had changed since becoming a parent, to identify Facebook's advantages and disadvantages compared to other forms of communication, and to talk about their experience of overlapping social spheres on Facebook. They were also asked their position on posting about their children, to recount any particularly positive or negative experiences on Facebook, and to describe the strategies employed to deal with or prevent negative experiences.

Limitations

By employing a web-based survey and semi-structured interviews, this study relies entirely on self-reporting measures.

Monitoring computer usage can be a more effective way of obtaining an accurate picture of actual behavior, for example, one study found students estimated they were spending 145 min a day on Facebook when they were actually only spending an average of 26 min per day (Junco, 2013). We decided not to monitor computer usage because of time limitations and because the study was deliberately exploratory and qualitative in its emphasis, being the first of its kind to examine the way Australian mothers of young children use and feel about Facebook. Monitoring actual use would be a useful way to triangulate results and achieve accurate quantitative statistics and is recommended for future studies into this area.

Data Analysis

With 117 survey responses and 17 interviews, the amount of data collected was larger than originally intended but small enough to conduct a combination of computer-derived statistics and manual content analysis. The in-built analysis features of SurveyMonkey were utilized to identify demographics, preferences and trends in Facebook behavior, and the relative importance of different issues to users. Meanwhile, manual analysis of the open-ended survey questions (“what do you see as the benefits of using Facebook” and “what are the downsides of using Facebook”) and interview transcripts was deemed the most effective way to make sense of the qualitative data and to link it to quantitative survey data. Text analysis software was considered, but with one estimate that it is only 30% accurate (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011), we decided to take a “thick data” approach. “Thick data” describes the unique insight offered by human stories and manual interpretation of data. It provides the “why” to big data’s “what,” the “stories that link and contextualize data” (Wang, 2013). The manual content analysis entailed reviewing individual responses and interview transcripts to identify common themes, concerns, and reasoning and comparing and linking the insights from interviews with the data from the survey.

During analysis, the 17 interviewees were categorized into three groups according to their Facebook behaviors and attitudes. The groups were devised by the authors upon analysis, as helpful markers along a spectrum of behaviors and attitudes toward privacy on Facebook. Ideas around acceptable and non-acceptable disclosures varied enormously, and to make statements about attitudes based on the “mothers of young children” category would have over-simplified the results and misrepresented the subjects. The groupings are as follows: *advanced-active* users ($n=6$, or 35%), *closed-protective* users ($n=4$, or 24%), and *fence-sitters* ($n=7$, or 41%). *Advanced-active* users were people who had integrated Facebook into their everyday life to a large extent, using it as a preferred method to communicate with friends, family, acquaintances, colleagues, and strangers. They were likely to be administrators of groups, and while they all engaged in

privacy protection strategies, they were more likely to be outspoken on Facebook than fence-sitters and closed-protective users and more likely to use Facebook to gather and debate parenting information. *Advanced-active* users were more willing than fence-sitters to un-friend people and were more likely than other users to have become close friends with people who they had met on Facebook. *Closed-protective* users were very privacy-conscious and tended to “look” and “like” a lot rather than “share” or post. They usually restricted their Facebook friends to close friends and family and were less likely than the other groups to friend colleagues, post status updates (one had never posted but still checked Facebook every day), or post pictures of their or others’ children. They tended to refrain from discussing health or parenting information related to their children on Facebook, but still gleaned useful information on such topics by looking at others’ threads and useful links. *Fence-sitters* were also likely to engage in privacy protection strategies; however, while they were typically wary around activities such as friending colleagues and posting children’s pictures, fence-sitters were pragmatic and sometimes engaged in the very activities that at other times they avoided. Unlike closed-protective users, they did not have set rules on what constituted acceptable sharing practices.

The advanced-active users cited a greater range of benefits than both fence-sitters and closed-protective users. However, those who were more invested in Facebook were also more likely to have experienced negative consequences such as disagreements, trolling, and social slights. Some closed-protective users enjoyed the benefits without the risk of burnout or getting caught up in arguments and drama. Passively “lurking” was found to serve a useful purpose as a risk-free way of accessing the extra social insight afforded by Facebook without being subject to the judgment, misunderstandings, and conflict that can occur when one expresses one’s opinions freely to a broad audience.

Results and Discussion

Demographics, Preferences, and Behaviors

Mothers aged 30–34 with toddlers aged 2–3 were the most likely to respond to the survey. Most were employed, with the largest cohort combining looking after their children with part-time paid work (35%) followed by “full-time parents not seeking employment” (26%; stay-at-home mums). The survey respondents who chose to provide their contact details came from all over Australia. They were generally experienced Facebook users, with 92% having had a profile for longer than 4 years and the most common length of time since joining being 6–8 years (46%). The interview subjects were an educated cohort—all but one of the 17 interviewees had a post-secondary qualification, in line with Pew research showing Facebook users are more likely to have a degree than the broader population (Duggan & Smith, 2013).

Table 1. What Type of “Friends” Do You Enjoy Interacting With Most on Facebook? (Select Up To Four).

Type of “friend”	%	N
Friends I see in person regularly	68.14	77
Friends I see in person occasionally	67.26	76
Other parents	50.44	57
Family I see in person regularly	38.05	43
Family I see in person occasionally	37.17	42
Former school friends	23.89	27
Current colleagues	10.62	12
Former colleagues	15.93	18
People I have never met in person	10.62	12
Other (please specify)	10.62	12
Acquaintances/friends-of-friends	4.42	5
Neighbors	1.77	2

Table 2. What Types of Facebook Activities Do You Participate in Most Often? (Select Up To Four).

Type of activity	%	N
Post photos/comments about my children	60.55	66
Reading others’ statuses passively (without liking/commenting/sharing)	53.21	58
Posting on private group pages	50.46	55
Commenting on others’ statuses	41.28	45
Private message/chats	37.61	41
Post photos/comments on topics not related to children	33.94	37
Running my own business	10.09	11
Other (please specify)	8.26	9
Sharing others’ statuses	0.92	1

Survey respondents were very much regular users, with 114 or 97% checking Facebook at least once a day, 39% checking more than three times a day, and around a quarter (25%) reporting they were on Facebook “all day every day.” Most (86%) estimated they were spending more than half an hour a day on Facebook, with “30 min to 1 hr a day” the most common amount of time (34%), followed by a third spending “1–2 hr a day” and 19% spending more than 2 hr each day.

“Dunbar’s number,” coined more than 20 years ago when an anthropologist proposed that humans could only comfortably maintain 150 stable relationships (Dunbar, 1992), holds roughly true with this sample, with most survey respondents (78%) reporting they have less than 200 “friends” on Facebook. Between 80 and 200 was the most common range (64%), followed by 200–500 (21%) and 20–80 (15%). Only one survey respondent had more than 500 “friends.” When asked who they enjoyed interacting with most on Facebook (see Tables 1 and 2), friends were most popular, with the two most common responses being “Friends I see in person regularly” (68%) and “Friends I see in person occasionally” (67%). “Other parents” were also popular (50%), followed

by “Family I see in person regularly” (38%) and “Family I see in person occasionally” (37%).

Granovetter’s (1973) strength of weak ties theory—that there are social benefits particular to our ties with outer-circle friends and acquaintances—is also relevant to this sample. Survey respondents liked Facebook’s ability to keep them connected with weaker ties, with “Friends seen occasionally” (67%) almost as popular as friends seen more frequently (68%) and more popular than family seen regularly (38%), current colleagues (11%), and neighbors (only 2%). “Other parents” were more popular than family, and survey respondents preferred to interact with former colleagues (16%) to current colleagues (11%) and favored former school friends (24%) over former university friends (7%). Twelve survey respondents (11%) enjoyed interacting with people they had never met in person. These figures, revealing mothers’ tendency to use Facebook to develop and maintain relationships with weaker ties, may also be influenced by privacy concerns—it may be safer to let a well-liked former colleague know you are living it up in Bali than rub it in your current colleagues’ noses; less risky to discuss toddler discipline with another parent than the parents-in-law.

Privacy Concerns and Change in Use Since Becoming a Parent

Most survey respondents (78%) agreed with the statement “privacy issues on Facebook are a concern,” making it the second most agreed with of the statements presented (“Facebook is addictive” was the most agreed with at 85%; see Tables 3 and 4). Only 4% of survey respondents were *not* concerned with privacy issues on Facebook, and when asked what they saw as the “downsides” of Facebook, privacy-related issues were the most cited (time-wasting and addiction were also popular). Survey respondents raised an extensive range of concerns around both social and institutional privacy, including concerns about personal data being collected and used for marketing; worries around the “cyber footprint” of their children; stalking, bullying, and the risk of family, acquaintances, colleagues, and potential employers using information on Facebook against them; confusion around the use and doubt over the efficacy of privacy settings; and concern about content ownership and others’ ability to share content that the original poster preferred to keep private.

Experience on the platform and becoming a parent had changed many users’ approach to Facebook, with changes in behavior described by interviewees demonstrating that movement across the user spectrum—for example, from fence-sitter to closed-protective or advanced-active—is a possible and relatively common result of changing life circumstances and experiences. Several interviewees described situations where they had changed their behavior

Table 3. Do You Agree With the Following Statements?

	Agree	Neither agree/ disagree	Disagree
	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)
Facebook is addictive	84.85 (84)	10.10 (10)	5.05 (5)
Privacy issues on Facebook are a concern	77.55 (76)	18.37 (18)	4.08 (4)
Facebook makes me feel more connected	72.73 (72)	20.20 (20)	7.07 (7)
Being on Facebook has helped me solve parenting problems	71.72 (71)	19.19 (10)	9.09 (9)
Facebook is the most efficient way to communicate with all the people in my life	54.55 (54)	29.29 (29)	16.16 (16)
Facebook makes me feel less isolated and therefore makes me a better parent	42.42 (42)	40.40 (40)	17.17 (17)
Facebook helps me meet new people	30.61 (30)	22.45 (22)	46.94 (46)
Facebook makes me feel more jealous	25.25 (25)	28.28 (28)	46.46 (46)
Being on Facebook has improved my professional/work prospects	18.18 (18)	34.34 (34)	47.47 (47)

Table 4. What Types of Posts Would You Be Unlikely to Make?

Type of post	%	N
Complaints about work	76.64	82
Pictures of other people's children	68.22	73
Requests for work referrals	60.75	65
Pictures of myself drinking alcohol	49.53	53
Requests for help with childcare	46.73	50
Complaints about parenthood	42.06	45
Political discussions	40.19	43
Pictures of my own children	36.45	39
Complaints about a business/poor service	24.30	26
I'll post whatever I'm feeling—nothing's off limits	22.43	24

to become less open about their views on parenting, political, and social issues after public disagreements had been played out on Facebook. Most (59%) survey respondents said they were spending more time on Facebook since becoming a parent. When asked how the way they used Facebook had changed, interviewees typically noted that pre-children they had used Facebook more for activities such as posting social pictures and keeping in touch with friends overseas, whereas as parents they were motivated to continue using Facebook as a way of accessing, sharing, and discussing information.

Several interviewees noted that while the way they used Facebook had changed when they became a parent (with some reassessing their social circle and culling friends lists or temporarily taking their profile down, shifting from fence-sitters to closed-protective users), the evolving nature of the platform had also affected their use. In the early days of Facebook, there were fewer users and posts were more typically status updates, whereas it has more recently grown to encompass a wider cross section of society (amplifying privacy concerns), while activities such as accessing articles of interest from the rapidly expanding Facebook-friendly media have become more prevalent.

Digital Footprints, Privacy, and Control: To Post or Not to Post Children's Pictures?

The privacy–openness paradox was illuminated in mothers' attitudes to posts about and photographs of their children on Facebook. As one survey respondent put it, "I love to share photos of my children but often get criticized for the risk I am taking by putting photos of them into the public domain." Survey respondents were divided over whether or not to post photographs of their own children, with a significant proportion (37%) reporting that they were unlikely to publish such content. One advanced-active interviewee deliberately took and posted pictures of her son who did not show his face, while several closed-protective users had requested that pictures of their own children be taken down:

We put one up when she was about a week old, just to announce that she'd been born, and the current plan is not to post any more—I might change my mind—we've asked family and friends not to post any of her.

Those who avoided posting photographs of their children cited issues of consent and concerns around leaving a digital footprint that may not be in the child's long-term best interests, reflecting consciousness of what Kumar and Schoenebeck (2015) refer to as privacy stewardship. For example, "Naked photos in the bath, or stories about toilet training," or as one advanced-active user put it,

I do worry that some people post pictures of their kids, and that it's not their story to be sharing, it's their kids' story—and that could affect their kids later in life.

While identity theft and pedophilia were fears cited in the online survey, the interviewees were less definite about their precise reasons for limiting their children's digital footprint, referring more to a general unease around the issue. As one put it, "I just don't really want her on the internet; I don't want to make that decision for her—when she's older and

she wants to put her photo up, go for it, that's up to her." (The same respondent also avoided posting photographs of her baby out of consideration for infertile friends—a sensitive and reasonable policy when contrasted with another interviewee's comment on the difficulty that she had viewing birth announcements and baby pictures while she was undergoing in vitro fertilization [IVF].) Interestingly, while advanced-active users tended to be more open and outspoken on potentially contentious matters such as politics and religion, they were also more likely to have deliberately decided not to post pictures of their children, as were closed-protective users. A key issue was the lack of control of images once they had been posted to Facebook. One survey respondent articulated her concern over the ease of others sharing pictures of her children: "Nothing is personal anymore. A public page once shared a picture of my kid without my consent. It was removed at my request, but in my opinion what once was published, will stay on the internet forever." These findings align with Ahern et al. (2007) who included parents of young children in their study of privacy patterns and considerations in online and mobile photo sharing. They found that parents, above any other group, were more concerned about privacy issues, and especially in regard to publicly posting pictures of their children for fear of who may access them.

Despite reservations, it is worth noting that "posting photos/comments about my children" was still the most popular Facebook activity for survey respondents, with 61% choosing it when asked to select up to four activities that they participated in most frequently. One fence-sitter interviewee summed up the paradox in this way:

I recently read an article where [an expert] was saying "you shouldn't do it because you never know how your pictures of your kids are going to be used, and you shouldn't assume it will be for innocent purposes," so my intention is to take them all down but by the same token I *love* seeing pictures of my friends' kids on there—*love it*—and I like putting up pictures of my kids occasionally so that my friends and family can see how my kids are doing. So it's really difficult.

While not directly comparable, Kumar and Schoenebeck (2015) found a large proportion of participants in their study to be at least "somewhat comfortable" with sharing children's pictures on Facebook.

If some mothers were reluctant to post pictures of their own children, many more were unwilling to risk irritating peers by posting "pictures of other people's children"; 68% of survey respondents reported they were unlikely to do so. Again, this was also the case for the parents surveyed by Ahern et al. (2007). While closed-protective and advanced-active users were more likely to have specific rules on posting (or not posting) other people's children's pictures, fence-sitters decided case-by-case. "I know which of my friends post pictures of their kids and which don't so I'd probably use that as my gauge," said one.

Parenting Support and Judgment via Facebook

Many survey respondents acknowledged Facebook's value as a way to connect with other parents and access useful parenting information, with most (72%) agreeing that Facebook had helped them solve parenting problems. This presents an unorthodox conceptualization of the privacy–openness paradox in regard to sharing information about children. All respondents, by default, needed to share anecdotes and, quite often, personal information about their children, to ask questions and seek advice. This is a different aspect of "openness" that tends to be overlooked in discussions about the digital footprint and privacy rights of children.

Interviewees approached parenting advice with varying degrees of openness. Closed-protective users were more likely to view other people's threads on topics of interest without posting or commenting themselves, while advanced-active users were more comfortable posing questions to groups sharing similar interests. The list of issues addressed and problems solved ranged from the mundane to the profound. One interviewee had located a copy of a child's much-loved toy from the other side of the world; another had changed the way she spoke to her toddler after reading a blog via Facebook about how to best encourage independence and confidence; another had gone searching for information about a child's digestive complaint that had resulted in a dietary overhaul and improved health for the whole family. Other issues that had been resolved or discussed via Facebook included toilet training, discipline issues, a myriad of health issues (including cradle cap, mastitis, and natural cough remedies), baby-settling techniques, breastfeeding, and weaning.

While both survey respondents and interviewees valued the parenting networks and support they received via Facebook, many—particularly closed-protective users—held misgivings about judgmental behavior and Facebook being used as a conduit for unsolicited and unwelcome advice:

There's always people posting about what they think an ideal mother should be. I think that that can be quite challenging for someone who's a new mother . . . I might say something like "rough night, I need a coffee" and it might be—"oh, she's still not sleeping that's horrible, haven't you tried the sleep doctor" . . . it's just unwelcome advice or information. I don't specifically ask for that type of information.

Examples of Facebook posts observed and deemed judgmental/unnecessary by interviewees included the following: a mother looking for a child's lost blanky receiving comments like "she shouldn't have a blanky," an anti-abortion message posted to a mothers' group, and posts sharing research around the side effects of cesarean sections deemed to be critical of women who had undergone the surgery. Despite such concerns, most did not see the risk of being

judged as enough of an annoyance to stop using Facebook; many pointed out that the barriers to opting out were too great as Facebook has become a more essential part of life (“it has become necessary technology to get invites to some events, information about some events, some businesses do not have websites, only a Facebook page etc,” wrote one survey respondent). The answer for most lay in changing the way they used Facebook to limit privacy intrusions and exposure to judgments and unwelcome advice. Strategies employed included using a non-identifying name or profile photograph, having a private profile, un-friending or having a limited friends list from the start, changing preferences to hide the posts of irritating “friends,” private messaging, and the use of private groups.

Almost a third of the interviewees talked about a lack of family and community support and found connecting with others via Facebook helped them plug some of those holes. Private groups were valued, particularly by advanced-active users, as a way of avoiding judgment and petty disputes when discussing motherhood and parenting. Several preferred Facebook groups to traditional face-to-face mothers’ groups; some did not have a mothers’ group in their area, while others found face-to-face groups too competitive and judgmental. As one put it,

I went to my mothers’ group for one session and it was unpleasant so I never went back. In those mothers’ groups you don’t have a choice about who you get shoved in a room with, whereas on Facebook if I choose not to engage in the situation—if someone pisses me off, basically—I don’t need to respond, I can just ignore it.

Another appealing aspect of the Facebook group over a face-to-face setting was the ability to seek out other parents with similar interests. Whether it was to vent about their partners, to ask a health question, or to debate a topic too contentious for public posts, advanced-active users felt that private groups were a safer place to talk about controversial aspects of parenthood:

I’m in about three or four different vaccination groups where people talk about all things that are vaccination, both pro and con; if it wasn’t for Facebook I wouldn’t be able to have those conversations with friends and family in case you offend someone—it’s so taboo.

The connections forged online both stemmed from and fed into real-life relationships; many used Facebook to keep in contact with their face-to-face mothers’ group, while several advanced-active users reported that they had developed supportive friendships with people whom they had originally met on Facebook. One described how following the death of her brother-in-law, her Facebook mothers’ group had bought her groceries for a fortnight, providing more practical support than family and longer established friends. Another who had moved from interstate had used Facebook to connect with other local mothers who had become confidantes:

I’ve been able to fly things to them and we’ve got a great relationship because if we’re in trouble with our own families or things in our relationships we can just ring each other up and say “oh my god can I come over for a cuppa”?

These types of Facebook-forged-friendships were particularly valuable because they provided users with a network and sounding board not connected to family. As one interviewee put it,

I think sometimes it helps as well that you don’t necessarily know them in real life; sometimes it’s nice to have someone that’s not in any way connected to any of the other bits in your life, they don’t have any vested interest in the outcome of whatever you’ve asked—sometimes that sort of unbiased information is handy.

An example of the benefit of this type of non-familial adviser was highlighted by another interviewee:

I’m trying to wean my baby at the moment and in one of the groups I’m in it’s very natural parenting and they don’t force babies to wean, and I find that very reassuring because my mum thinks that I have to wean and she always tells me “he’s too grown up, you have to wean” and it just makes me feel more confident, that I’m not the only one like that . . . It’s just reassuring.

While several closed-protective interviewees were critical of people using Facebook to garner pediatric health information, some advanced-active users argued that specialized groups provided more trustworthy advice than other sources. “The kind of groups I’m in are obviously very experienced mums, but are also people like nurses and naturopaths and midwives—people who have medical training and are really great sources of information,” said one.

The results indicate that sharing information and anecdotes about young children via Facebook can be helpful for mothers who are seeking support, as long as they are able to ignore or screen out unwanted judgments and advice. While many commented that Facebook was no substitute for face-to-face contact, it can provide access to more diverse opinions and interactions than one would experience otherwise, and such interactions can even translate into face-to-face and material support. The research also emphasizes that a child’s digital footprint extends beyond that created by sharing pictures and news.

Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

This research highlights that while privacy-related issues are a major concern for mothers of young children, the benefits offered by Facebook and our increasingly digitally networked society cannot be discounted. A generation or two back, women’s wider networks were often curtailed when

they had a first baby and had no choice but to stop work. Today, women—educated, Internet-connected women at least—can work at home and maintain and expand their networks without leaving the house or even picking up the telephone. The catch is of course that the demands of child-rearing have not changed and are as intense and time-consuming as they have always been, so while mothers have been liberated, on one hand, their emancipation comes with an ever-growing list of expectations and hazards, on the other, bringing the privacy–openness paradox to the fore. While risks from sharing too much information exist (jobs and friendships may be lost, relationships and reputations may be damaged, potential negative effects on children’s futures must be considered), the pleasure, information, and affordances derived from sharing—especially children’s photographs, and health and social information—seem to outweigh the risks for the majority, in the short to medium term at least. Mothers are considering the responsibilities of privacy stewardship and coming to dramatically different conclusions, manifested in the three categories of user identified in this research. Participants demonstrated similar levels of consideration regarding privacy regardless of their choice to strategize as an advanced-active, fence-sitter, or closed-protective user.

The long-term implications—for mothers, children, and society at large—of personal information being shared via Facebook are unknown and outside of the scope of this project, but this study highlights privacy issues (particularly those concerning children) as an important and contentious aspect of SNS use that warrants careful consideration by researchers, platform designers, and policymakers. The three types of user provide a yardstick by which to discuss privacy-related issues on Facebook and SNSs, which could add to broader discussions around other demographics besides mothers (such as parents in general, students, or job-seekers) in future research.

While this article highlights the uneasy nexus between privacy protection and the benefits of sharing via Facebook, it does not presume to recommend blanket changes to policy, design, or behavior. Many users in this study wanted greater control over their children’s images in particular to restrict others from sharing them; however, others took a view that avoiding privacy intrusions was more the responsibility of the user to avoid than Facebook’s to prevent. We do emphasize that better addressing users’ privacy-related concerns, particularly around photograph and video-sharing (of children and more generally) while maintaining and maximizing the benefits of openness and information-sharing, should be an ongoing priority for Facebook.

With opting out of Facebook an increasingly unpopular option, weighing up privacy risks with the advantages of open communication is an ongoing ambiguity that mothers are increasingly becoming more confident at negotiating. Many love sharing photographs of their children and enjoy hearing news and gathering information, not only from

close friends and family but also via looser connections. While privacy issues were one of the most commonly cited downsides of Facebook use, the mothers in this study generally enjoyed the feedback they got from sharing their and their children’s news and were well-versed at mitigating against problems presented by overlapping social spheres and the risk of revealing too much information (though they still found Facebook’s privacy settings confusing and did not trust their efficacy). More remains to be understood about Facebook and other SNSs’ effects on privacy (both in practice and in perception), but in the meantime, mothers will continue to use and adapt social networking technologies on their own terms, becoming more adept at negotiating the medium’s pitfalls and, increasingly, embracing the paradox.

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