Academic Mothers Building Online Communities

It Takes a Village

Edited by
Sarah Trocchio · Lisa K. Hanasono
Jessica Jorgenson Borchert
Rachael Dwyer · Jeanette Yih Harvie

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PREFACE

Academic mothers*[1] do not always have lives that follow the traditional academic narrative of earning an advanced degree and then seamlessly moving onto a tenure-track academic career that ends with becoming a full professor. Instead, academic mothers* may live fractured academic narratives, such as putting their tenure-track academic career on hold to care for children while, if they are lucky, also teaching a few courses at a local university. When academic mothers* do follow the traditional academic narrative and move away from family and other familiar support networks, they do so with the knowledge they have lost the "village" they created to raise their children and must now find a new one. For some academic mothers*, this means finding a community of support in online spaces, or places we define as "virtual villages," where academic mothers* are supported both as caregivers and academics.

In *Academic Mothers* Building Online Communities: It Takes a Village,* we open up spaces for academic mothers* to share their experiences in creating and curating virtual villages. All our chapters were written by those who identify as academic mothers* themselves—mothers* who, like many professional, working moms, navigate the demanding needs of a career and a family. Our definitions of the word mother are inclusive and include non-cishet mothers*, queer mothers*, genderfluid mothers*, transwomen mothers*, and other diverse bodies who identify as mothers*.

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[1] We add the asterisk at the end of mother* to give space for non-cisgendered mothers*, non-gender conforming mothers*, and other inclusive mother* identities.

Further, our definitions of academic are also fluid to allow for graduate student mothers*, mothers* in non-tenure-track positions, and mothers* who are in non-faculty positions within academic institutions.

For *Academic Mothers* Building Online Communities: It Takes a Village,* we have been fortunate enough to have included the voices of sixty-six academic mothers* currently working in six different countries, lending a richness of diversity to the voices and backgrounds represented within our collection. The academic mothers* in this collection also occupy varied academic positions, from tenured full professors and administrators to graduate students to non-tenure-track faculty. The diversity of this collection lends credence to the varied lives of academic mothers* within the neoliberal university structure. The stories within this collection also represent the organic nature of ways academic mothers* have navigated academic systems to advocate, share, and collaborate with one another to create stronger communities through participating in and at times creating their own virtual villages.

Our collection also was formed through a virtual village. We found one another because of a small online Facebook group that focused on supporting academic mothers*. It was a group we had all found supportive at various times when we were facing challenges of parenting, of academic culture, of our own lives. In a way, this book is a homage to that group, which to us remains a private, supportive space. Out from our shared virtual village, we joined together, as a smaller virtual village, to discuss curating an edited collection on academic motherhood. When we began discussing what our edited collection may look like, two of us lived on opposite sides of the globe: one of us lived in Germany and another in Australia, while three of us lived across three different time zones in the U.S. In the three years we have worked on this edited collection, we have seen many changes in our professional and personal lives. Jessica has received tenure and promotion to Associate Professor of English at her institution, and near the completion of this edited collection saw her twins start kindergarten. Jeanette started an applied research position that allows her to utilize her academic training as a mixed-method researcher and made an international move with her family. Sarah became a nationally board-certified career coach and strategist, and has built a solo practice with a focus on applying her critical lens to support those marginalized by and within the academy to seek and find work that honors their identities and aligns with their values. Rachael took on program leadership responsibilities and began a new line of research in cultural diversity in arts education. Lisa became an academic director of a national center that focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and supporting the success of academics in higher education; in addition, her youngest child started kindergarten while her stepdaughter began college. Even with these successful personal and professional moves, we have also faced challenges during the time we have spent on this project. We have held space for each other as we navigated the COVID-19 pandemic, the death of beloved family members (both furry and human), and the myriad challenges we faced as parents to small children and as academics. We have also celebrated each other as we have won prestigious awards, received grants, published, and when we were awarded tenure and promotion.

In imagining what this book may look like, we discussed various possibilities, but ultimately believe the voices in our collection speak for themselves. In reading through our proposals for chapters, we saw some contributions as short narratives highlighting the personal experiences of academic mothers*. Other contributions in our collection are academic articles using qualitative methods such as autoethnography, poly-ethnography, discourse analysis, and other research methodologies that examine how academic mothers survive and thrive in virtual villages. From these diverse arrangements, we saw it best to structure this collection into three parts that are held together in thematic ways. Our three themes are:

- Part 1: Identity and Marginalization
- Part 2: Connection and Support
- Part 3: Pandemic Parenting

The chapters in all three parts eloquently speak toward the need for a community of structured and sustaining support for academic mothers* in their shared yet separate and evolving journeys of motherhood and academia. In the sections below, we'll discuss each part by sharing their thematic focus with a brief introduction to each chapter.

Part 1: Identity and Marginalization

In *Academic Mothers* Building Online Communities: It Takes a Village*, we wanted to capture the dynamic nature of how academic mothers* use, and respond to, their online social networks through constructs of identity practices. Academic mothers* are not just academic and mothers* but also carry with them other social and cultural identities. Part 1: Identity and

Marginalization includes chapters that comment on how academic mothers'* virtual villages are optimistic and hopeful spaces for sharing and networking, while also commenting on how the spaces are not always positive experiences for all academic mothers* because of the white privilege that is heavily present in neoliberal higher educational institutions.

To open our discussion of this theme, our collaborative chapter, "It Takes a Village: Academic Mothers Building Online Communities," shares the story of how we came together within and because of a specific virtual village together to create a conversation around how online social interactions benefit academic motherhood. Our voices share how virtual villages can support academic mothers*, who are often bound by traditional academic narratives where they leave the familiar villages of family and friends for academic careers where they need to create and curate new structures of support, leaving many of us to rely on our virtual villages.

A goal of this collection was to also highlight personal narratives of academic motherhood, and Cynthia M. Harley's contribution begins sharing these unique and important personal stories of academic motherhood. In her contribution titled, "How Finding Identity with an Online Community Led to Advocacy," she shares her own academic mama story, while also sharing how her mentorship and advocacy led to the creation of a nonprofit organization that serves to support and bring awareness to inequities academic caregivers face in the academy.

Similar to institutions of higher education, virtual villages are not always welcoming spaces. Lisa K. Hanasono's thoughtful contribution gives space to how virtual villages are not always supportive spaces for all academic mothers*, particularly for academic mothers* of color. In "(Un) Supported: Challenges and Opportunities Experienced by Academic Mothers* of Color in Online Communities," she highlights the voices of academic mothers* of color who share their experiences of racism and discrimination in their virtual villages. In her contribution, she shares results from interviews with academic mothers* of color who share their experiences using online platforms, such as WhatsApp and Twitter, as a way to find support as academics and as mothers*.

One of the many benefits of virtual villages is in how they allow for the opportunity to bring together scholars and mothers* of many countries and ethnicities. The chapter titled "Barefoot Strangers: Multinational Digital Epistemologies of Academic Moms, Mamás, Mamy, Umahat" by authors Stefani Boutelier, Hala A. Guta, Iwona Leonowicz-Bukała, Alpha A. Martínez-Suárez, and Agata A. Lambrechts create a brilliantly co-authored chapter sharing how their communication supported one another. Their chapter also illustrates ways academic mothers* may sustain career paths through disruptions of pandemics, illness, and other challenges that arise when working from home with children.

In a powerful co-authored narrative, Stephanie L. Shepherd, Leigh Graham, Abigail S. Hornstein, Katie Jo LaRiviere, Kathleen M. Muldoon, and Monica C. Schneider, all write of their experiences as academic mothers* parenting disabled children. In the collaborative poly-narrative, “Creating an Online Community of Support: Mothers of Children with Disabilities Working in the Academy,” these authors share how gendered inequities for mothers* in the academy affect parenting children with disabilities through each author sharing their personal stories while in conversation with research that supports ways the academy may better support academic caregivers.

Identity remains at the forefront of many chapters in this section of our edited collection on academic mothers*, and the chapter “Who Is There When Everything Changes: The Anchoring Effect of Online Maternal Support Groups During Periods of Liminal Professional Identity” by Emily Rosado-Solomon, Elisheva Cohen, Caitlin Vaughn Carlos, and Traci-Ann Wint explores the intersections of mother and scholar as performed within virtual villages. Their chapter is uniquely situated as it presents how it illustrates how academic mothers* may face a period of “liminal identity,” or a time when they are forming their identity as academics, such as during graduate school or early in their academic careers.

Support can be given through nonprofit work, but also through how social exchanges are performed on social media. Amanda G. Taylor in her contribution, “How Academic Mothers Experience Face Threatening Acts and Reinforcing Facework on Instagram,” writes about how politeness is enacted on the social networking site, Instagram, among academic mothers*. Taylor expertly analyzes how hashtags on Instagram function as ways of building a sense of solidarity for academic mothers* through the lens of politeness theory.

Graduate school can be an isolating experience for graduate students who are also parents, and especially if they have few to no other graduate student peers who are also parents. In her personal narrative, “#GradStudentMom Finds Community Online,” Lori Arnold shares her experiences in using social media to network with other graduate student moms as she shares pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding on Instagram and how that led to the formation of a virtual village for her as a graduate student.

As with graduate student mothers*, single mothers* may also face disruptions and discrimination within academic institutions. In “Being Alone Together: The Affordances and Constraints of Social Media Groups for Single Moms,” Emily Donald and Alexandria Hanson explore research surrounding how academic single mothers* are supported in online social spaces. This research adds to the important conversation of how institutions can find ways to support single parents as they navigate academic structures that often favor traditional family structures of dual parents.

A diverse range of social interactions based in identity constructs as they are performed within virtual villages is represented within the contexts of these chapters in Part 1: Identity and Marginalization. While not all the contributions share positive stories, they do illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of online connections. In reading these selections, it is impossible not to note the diverse and complex identities academic mothers* have in the academy and beyond.

Part 2: Connection and Support

For academic mothers* who have moved to locations that are geographically distant from family and friends, online communities may provide an opportunity to find support. But online support systems may also be needed as an academic mother begins her career path in academia, such as how graduate students may reach out to online communities for advice and support in balancing their academic goals with being a mother. The chapters in Part 2: Connection and Support illustrate these stories and other stories showing how virtual villages can help provide supportive structures to academic mothers* as they navigate the academy.

Many academic mothers* rely on a spouse or partner to help them support their career path, but what happens during the loss of a spouse? Kelly O. Secovnie writes a gut-punching contribution on how a large group of academic mothers* supported her during the death of her spouse, someone she had known since childhood. In her autoethnographic narrative, “Dealing with Death in Academia, or When 11,000 Mamas* Had My Back,” she relates how in a large online group another academic mother from within her university system was able to share a policy that would help her lessen her teaching load while grieving her spouse. In reducing her teaching load for that semester, she was able to move her children and begin healing.

A co-authored and yet deeply personal look at academic motherhood is shared by Laura Quaynor and Agata Szczeszak-Brewer, illustrating how academic mothering identities can be rich, diverse, and empowering, in spite of the challenging shifts between work life and mom life that occurred during COVID-19, the flash fiction narrative titled "The Face(book) of Academic Motherhood: Online Communities Respond to the Traumatic and the Mundane" presents a powerful outlook at how the authors were able to find spaces to thrive in their social exchanges online with one another.

Authors Stephanie A. Tikkanen, Melissa Rizzo, and Emily T. Cripe's contribution, evocatively titled "Hell Hath No Fury Like a Scorned Woman's Friend: Reflected Anger in Academic Mother* Online Groups," expertly analyzes how online communities may also function as ways for individuals to support one another through what the authors term reflected anger, or a process where another person gives voice to the anger they perceive someone else to be wanting to express in efforts to lend support within an online space. With reflected anger, support can be shared through the sharing of similar emotions, such as anger, at stories of inequity that academic mothers* may face within the academy.

Academic mothers*' virtual villages can be a safe, or brave, space for them to ask questions that they may not feel comfortable asking elsewhere. Lauren Walker brilliantly explores this through discussion of sexual intimacy in "Online Groups as Source for Communication About the Taboo: Sexual Implications of Academic Mothers*," taking on how motherhood changes sexual desire and intimacy, but shows how online groups can play a supportive role in rekindling intimacy after childbirth.

The final chapter in this section, "Social Support Theory: Physical Isolation and Academia with Children" written by Diane Lally, Kathryn M. Tanaka, Floriza Freire Gennari, and Laura A. Bailey Smith, argues how Online Social Support (OSS) provides a theoretical framework of support for academic mothers*. In their chapter, they share the results from interviews with academic mothers*, which highlights the role Online Social Support plays within building a sense of stability and solidarity for academic mothers*, many of whom often leave the close geography of family and friends to take on academic career paths elsewhere.

In all these chapters featured in Part 2: Connection and Support, social networks serve as catalysts for not only creating a shared community but also a space where identities may be recognized in the brave, hopeful spaces of the virtual village. These chapters all represent ways academic mothers* use online communities to perform their multiple identities of mother and academic, but also feel as if they are a part of a community of mothers* who support and lift one another when needed.

Part 3: Pandemic Parenting

In Part 3: Pandemic Parenting, we look at online support through multiple platforms, such as on Facebook groups, through text messaging, and even on Zoom meetings. Contributions focus on ways academic mothers* have supported one another during the COVID-19 pandemic, when cut off from the physical support of family structures, and during times of career and identity transitions. All selections in this part represent the important ways academic mothers* come together to form valuable support networks with one another. Even though these stories of academic mothers* supporting each other online, the connections you will read about make it seem as if they are geographically much closer.

A shared sense of solidarity and support is also enacted through the collaborative personal narrative shared by Maria João Lobo Antunes and Jordana N. Navarro in their chapter, "Building Welcoming Spaces on Social Media: Motherhood in Academia During a Pandemic and Beyond." They share how various social media spaces, such as Twitter, helped them create a strong friendship during a pandemic, which helped them feel supported as academic mothers* navigating the challenges imposed by academic institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of the chapters in our edited collection advocate for the importance of a virtual village, and the chapter "Drafting While Drifting: Developing a Digital Village of Support and Advocacy During the COVID-19 Pandemic" by Tanya Romero-González, Diane Sabenacio Nititham, and Sara Cooper further argues for the importance of virtual villages, especially during challenges such as what the COVID-19 pandemic brought to academic spaces and to academic motherhood. Their contribution expertly lends a personal look at how each author navigated the COVID-19 pandemic as academics and as mothers, giving further examples as to why academic mothers* need to feel supported by their institutions and other outside communities.

Academic career paths have traditionally been only open to non-disabled bodies and authors Jasmine L. Blanks Jones, Lynn M. Bielski, Jessica P. Cerdeña, Ivanna Richardson, Chonika Coleman-King, Colleen C. Myles-Baltzly, Helen K. Ho, Janet Garcia-Hallett, Jennifer

H. Greene-Rooks, Katharina A. Azim, Kathryn E. Frazier, Kathryn Wagner, Laura Quaynor, Meike Eilert, Stacey R. Lim, Summer Melody Pennell, and Tiffany Brooks in their collaborative chapter brilliantly focus on how disabled mothers* may be supported through virtual networks when institutions cannot adequately provide social and emotional support. In "Building a Virtual Village: Academic Mothers'* Online Social Networking During COVID-19," the authors argue how online networks can allow for participants to imagine and gain new ways of support that are accessible, safe, and inexpensive, and make way for motherscholars* to gain the further academic support they need to thrive in the academy as disabled scholars.

A large part of one's academic identity exists through publishing, and Megan Donelson in her personal narrative, "*The First Rule about Writing Group*: How a Virtual Writing Group Changed My Trajectory Without Saying a Word," shares how a small group of academic women all working on research projects related to motherhood came together to write each week through synchronous Zoom meetings. Her contribution shares how these weekly meetings helped to give space to academic mothers* and support their writing goals, allowing them to progress in their academic career paths or academic goals.

All these chapters represent ways academic mothers* have used social media networks to parent throughout the pandemic, and among them is a co-authored collaborative chapter from Elizabeth Alsop, Laurel Harris, Tahneer Oksman, and Lauren M. Rosenblum titled "'Comedy and Tragedy,' or How We Used Our Group Chat to Fill the Pandemic Care Gap." This contribution shares how instant messaging helped create a community of support throughout the social isolation and challenges imposed during COVID-19 remote work and how the authors were able to make and create space for one another.

Authors Sara Bender, Kristina S. Brown, Olga Vega, and Deanna L. Hensley Kasitz close this section with their own contribution with their collaborative chapter, titled "Kids at the Door: An Autoethnography of Our Shared Research Identity as Academic Mothers in Virtual Collaboration." Their chapter is uniquely situated as it presents how a shared research project on how COVID-19 affected gender and productivity also allowed them to form a meaningful friendship with one another and support one another through their shared identities as academic mothers*, which highlights the value of online networking for academic mothers*.

All the chapters in Part 3: Pandemic Parenting demonstrate how virtual villages can be a way that many academic mothers* may find support as mothers* and as scholars outside of the oppressive systems of academic institutions that historically have not always valued gendered labor, and particularly during times of challenges, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finding ways to academic women to feel their career as academics and their lives as mothers are all valued is paramount, and this edited collection lives as one way to give space to the continuing strength of academic mothers*.

A Thank You to All Academic Mothers* and Our Reviewers

When our group of editors first met in late 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic began, we were unsure of how or when this edited collection would happen, and sometimes even if it would happen. We had envisioned many things and even briefly talked about creating a collection as a homage to our own special virtual village, but we hope our collection is more far-reaching. For us, our edited collection strives to be a homage to all academic mothers*. A few academic mothers* lent their stories and their scholarship and we lent our labor in curating the voices that follow.

We also share our deepest gratitude to all the academic mothers* who reviewed and gave valuable and expert feedback to the chapters in this collection. Each chapter of this curated and unique edited collection has been double-blind peer-reviewed and revised from the reviewer feedback. We thank our reviewers for their time and attention to this process, and for their effective and creative contributions to the research and narratives presented in this book. Without them, we wouldn't have this powerful contribution to the conversations around academia and motherhood.

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It Takes a Village: Academic Mothers Building Online Communities

Rachael Dwyer, Sarah Trocchio, Jessica Jorgenson Borchert, Lisa K. Hanasono, and Jeanette Yih Harvie

INTRODUCTION

One mom said, "I breastfed my kid until she was three."

Another mom said, "My kid came out sucking on a bottle."

A totally different mom said, "I fed my kids organic tomatoes with zucchini pasta for dinner."

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> And yet another mom said, “My kid ate a Happy Meal in the car.”
>
> Then the last mom shrugged her shoulders and said, “I’m not even sure where my kid is.”
>
> And all the moms lived happily ever after as friends who love and appreciate each other even though they’re different. They linked arms and together went searching for that last mom’s kid who was found under the table eating butter directly from the tub.
>
> From Meg Duncan—*What a life, shared on Mum Central*.

This sentiment captures the nature of a parenting village. Mothers*[1] are judged harshly online for almost all of their life choices: what they wear, where they live, if they are pursuing a career, or even how they structure holidays. It seems a key ingredient in #momlife is judgment, which leads to feelings of shame or “mom guilt.” Even in communities that aim to support mothers, like online caregiver groups, shaming remains pervasive. Communities like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit are representative of platforms that tell and retell shaming stories through online posts and stories (see, e.g., BoredPanda). And yet, online connections have allowed people to seek out their “village,” or their community of people who share their values or experiences in ways that resonate with and enrich their lives.

The truth is the five of us are editors on this collection because of an online group we joined for academic mothers. The group was born because of one mama who was happily pregnant with her second child, but faced a collection of challenges as she managed the demands of completing her Ph.D. program and working full time, while living geographically apart from her partner and other family members. Anyone with firsthand experience of any of these life factors understands it’s not a

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[1] We use the terms mothers* or mamas* inclusively, encompassing all who identify as mothers, including those who are non-cisgender, non-binary, or have gender identities other than cis-women.

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combination that screams healthy work-life balance. She knew she'd need people around her for support, and that most of the people in her immediate circle didn't understand what she was facing. She needed people who'd been there, who "got it," and were in a similar life stage. She started a Facebook group for academic women who were pregnant or had newborns, and the rest is history.

Over the coming years, the group discussed all aspects of baby-raising, toddlerhood, preschool, as well as advice for starting, continuing, or, in some cases, leaving an academic career. The group has celebrated completing doctorates; gaining new jobs, tenure, and promotion; and subsequent pregnancies. Members also have cried together over failed relationships, miscarriages, family deaths, toxic work environments, shfiting political landscapes, and the impossibilities of achieving work-life balance. As one group member recently said: "You're my 550 closest friends I've never met, and I love you all.☺"

After a few years together, there was a desire to build on our shared experiences of virtual parenting communities and our academic work, and with this desire the concept for this book was born. We specifically wanted to consider the aspects of virtual communities, including but not limited to social media, and contributions these communities make to support people's lives. Soon after we decided to start this project, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The challenges academic mothers faced before this global health crisis, including geographic isolation, precarity, and gendered inequity within the academy, expanded. So too did the need for virtual villages. This chapter will provide the context and theoretical framing for our conversations about virtual communities for academic mothers.* We begin by outlining the scope of the book and what we mean when we use the terms "academic," "mothers," and "virtual communities," all of which are defined broadly and inclusively. We also consider the impacts that virtual communities have had on social, political, and cultural institutions, particularly how they include and exclude those on the margins and intersections of societies. We conclude the chapter by considering the ways in which the supportive relationships developed in virtual villages have been mirrored in the approaches to research that are represented in this collection.

Context for AcaMamas: Who, When, and Why

Historically, the professoriate and academia have been male dominated and patriarchal (Thwaites & Pressland, 2017): explicitly hierarchical and competitive with expectations, policies, and practices that marginalized women and those with caregiving responsibilities (Manathunga et al., 2020). Although university faculty and student populations have diversified, mothers in academia are disproportionately overrepresented in precarious faculty and staff positions, and they continue to experience a myriad of institutional and interpersonal barriers, such as gender wage gaps that are exacerbated by stop-the-clock tenure policies, glass ceilings, and sticky floors that prevent career advancement, inadequate or absent parental leave policies, expensive or scarce local childcare options, and social biases (Burkinshaw, 2015; Christofides et al., 2013; Taylor & Lahad, 2018; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). These challenges are amplified when mothers are also members of other minoritized groups, such as people of color, people with disabilities, international scholars, non-native dominant language speakers, first-generation academics, and LGBTQ+ members (Acker, 2006; Atewologun et al., 2016; Crenshaw, 1988, 1991). To secure employment and pursue educational opportunities, many academic mothers reside in geographical locations that are not near immediate or extended family, often compounding experiences of isolation in academia, which were common prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic (Sibai et al., 2019) and have become even more pronounced as the pandemic continued (Leal Filho et al., 2021). Collectively these conditions make finding support challenging for many mothers in the academy.

To better support the success of academic mothers, institutional transformation is imperative. From revising inequitable policies and practices, holding faculty and university administrators accountable to fulfilling institutional commitments that value diversity, equity, and inclusion, using workload dashboards as a tool to make academic labor more visible and equitable, institutionalizing more flexible work accommodations, and providing more targeted institutional support (e.g., DeAro et al., 2019; Gonzales & Griffin, 2020; Malisch et al., 2020; O'Meara et al., 2020). There are numerous actions that universities and colleges can take to mitigate and remove barriers that many academic mothers and other minoritized scholars face. However, significant and sustainable institutional transformation can take years, and the critical inequities and ongoing stressors that academic mothers face must be addressed through immediate and ongoing actions. Moreover, academic mothers may desire support from people outside of their universities and colleges who might not be entrenched in departmental politics to serve as a solid sounding board beyond the workplace.

Complementing extant institutional actions, the provision and exchange of social support within broader communities of care can play a pivotal role in the success of academic mothers. A small, but growing body of scholarship has begun to highlight how social support can help those who identify as academic mothers* to survive—and even thrive. The literature highlights how support can be particularly helpful in navigating and dealing with challenges that are often uniquely experienced by academics, such as coping with negative course evaluations (e.g., LeFebvre et al., 2020), navigating pressures related to research productivity, and "discussing strategies to resist marginalization in academia," such as challenging traditional mothering ideals and redefining what it means to be a mother in the academy (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019, p. 114). Collectively, these studies reveal how academic mothers are using different communication technologies to create more expansive communities of care, build social capital, and create meaningful interpersonal and collective connections.

However, there remains a dearth of research that takes an intersectional approach on how academic mothers are building and sustaining virtual villages to seek and receive social support. While many academic mothers face some similar challenges, they are experienced uniquely and often inequitably due to broader interlocking systems of power and oppression. For example, a white woman who is a full professor, department chair, and mother of two adult children will face different challenges than a single mother of color who is teaching six college courses at three different universities to make ends meet. An international mother who is navigating a complicated divorce and custody arrangement with her three young children's father might have some support needs that are unique from a doctoral student who just gave birth at a university with no formal parental leave policy for graduate teaching assistants. In short, there is a need for a more nuanced approach to the ways academic mothers are building solidarity across diverse identities and experiences while simultaneously affirming and honoring the ways seeking, exchange, and reception of support may differ given their unique positionalities. It is these nuances that the contributions in this volume seek to explore.

Virtual Villages: Building Relationships Online

What Do We Mean by Virtual Villages?

"It takes a village to raise a child" is a well-known adage associated with child-raising, but the reality is that a village is unlikely for academic mothers* who often have to relocate away from family and friends to pursue their education and/or career. Online social media groups may function as "virtual villages," or online spaces where academic mothers are supported by other academic mothers creating a space for community and a sense of validation in their parenting and academic endeavors. As evident in this book's chapters, academic mothers* have found some online groups to be supportive spaces to discuss and navigate the imbalance between academic careers and motherhood. For purposes of this collection, we defined academic career paths inclusively, creating space for individuals who are graduate students, in non-tenure track, alternative academic (alt-ac,), and non-academic (non-ac)positions to contribute their voices. Mothers* working in these spaces require virtual villages for many reasons, such as the likelihood of moving to take a position away from family and friends and the challenges in navigating academic institutions that are not always family-friendly. In this section we explore the positive impacts and the challenges encountered in such communities, as described in the literature and as documented through personal anecdotal evidence but overlooked by research to date. The chapters in this volume contribute to filling some of the gaps in this research.

Positive Impacts of Virtual Villages

Virtual villages can serve as a vital space for academic mothers who aim to seek and receive social support, as these groups allow academic mothers to connect over vast geographical distances and build online communities of care where members support one another. Much of the appeal of these groups lies in the asynchronous and yet social nature of their platforms (Arnold, 2016). For academic mothers in particular, virtual villages become virtual villages because of this asynchronous nature along with the ability to share what it is like to be an academic and be a mother, such as what can be seen through the use of the hashtag #amwritingwithbaby (Cohen Miller, 2016). This hashtag does not simply represent motherhood; it represents academic motherhood, as we have learned to write while caring for our children. By sharing this hashtag, social media users can connect to other academic mothers and commiserate in the lack of balance in motherhood and academia, but also celebrate our achievements as mother-scholars.

The use of social media to support academic mothers has positive effects, such as giving academic mothers the ability to show the realistic side of motherhood, showing the chaotic blending of academic life and parenting, and helping to fight back against the ideal of the perfect mom (Chen, 2013). Allowing spaces for supporting the development of mothers*' confidence in caregiving is an important aspect in motherhood, and studies have shown that virtual villages, or online parenting groups like those found on Facebook, help to develop a new mothers' confidence (e.g., Morris, 2014). Further, Gibson (2013) has shown that Facebook can help improve confidence and allow new mothers develop a sense of identity by sharing their personal motherhood stories in supportive virtual villages.

Furthermore, the use of social media has been helpful to help ease the stress of academic moms through the use of memes, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was increasingly stressful for academic caregivers (Bauer & Ngondo, 2022). The creation and curation of activities within virtual villages in which academic mothers reside may help in reducing feelings of isolation as many academic mothers may have to relocate away from family to take on academic careers. Virtual villages may also provide a space for the emotional support that family may typically provide to a new mom. In cases where the virtual village has an academic focus, it may be possible that such groups can provide professional support, such as giving advice on navigating new motherhood as an academic.

Caregiving is hard, which makes the appeal of virtual villages stronger as these can support an academic caregiver through challenges, such as we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. While joining groups for specific support shows the benefits of such virtual villages, doing so also further highlights some of the weaknesses inherent within academic institutions to support academic caregivers. For academic mothers* who may be distant from family because of their academic career paths, creating and curating a sense of community is not only helpful, but likely necessary for survival. Along with the distance from family, academic careers are often taxing, leaving a need to find a way for an academic mother to find balance, or something like it, between the demands of work and the demands of caregiving. These factors leave academic families in challenging binds, especially when encountering a specific health crisis and this has been further amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in a recent article titled "Caregiving, Disability, and Gender in Academia in the Time of COVID-19," Schneider et al. (2021) noted that the individualism of American culture already sets up parents of disabled children to fail, as it has created a "persistent underfunding of support for people with disabilities" leading these individuals to create their own networks of support (p. 13). During the

COVID-19 pandemic, many carefully curated networks of support that relied on in-person contact were lost, leaving caregivers of children with disabilities feeling as if there is no end to work between the needs of caring for children and trying to create an academic presence. All this led to further use of virtual villages as a vital source of support, both due to its availability and its asynchronous nature, and especially in cases where support was needed during times of crisis.

Challenges with Virtual Spaces

Virtual villages have the potential to create communities and thereby reduce feelings of isolation through the support they provide. However, not all virtual communities are the same, with significant differences between them, depending on the size of the community, the level of privacy, the regularity of contributions (posts and comments), and the synchronicity of the communication. Li et al. (2021) found that chat groups that provide opportunities for more synchronous interactions lead to a greater sense of community cohesion and, thus, are better spaces for positive social support than asynchronous forums. Larger public forums are notorious spaces for poor online behavior, due to factors such as online disinhibition (Suler, 2004), and tend to encourage performative parenting rather than social or informational support and group cohesion (Tratner, 2022).

Social media spaces may cultivate and calcify tense rivalries between mothers given the prevalence of "combative motherhood" as a social and cultural framework (Milkie et al., 2016), anchored by the belief that mothers can (and should) earn their societal worth by vying for dominance over alternative modes of mothering. Combative motherhood is often represented by the "mommy wars," which started over tensions between stay-at-home moms and working moms, but has since evolved to cover a range of topics, including breast versus formula feeding, co-sleeping versus sleep training, and prohibited versus permitted screen time (Abetz & Moore, 2018; Macdonald, 2009; Milkie et al. 2016). As Milkie and colleagues indicate (2016), "mommy wars" are predicated on the idea that mother's worth in modern society is often assessed according to how well they compete with other moms about the ostensibly "correct" way to do things (e.g., nurse until 12 months or longer, without exception).

Social media has rapidly expanded the possible terrain in which mommy wars are waged as they are especially rife with opportunities to communicate and compete with other mothers with whom they would otherwise not have been able to know prior to technology advances that allow for connections to be made across geographic and temporal boundaries (Abetz & Moore, 2018). Because these communities are rampant, but also often siloed, according to other aspects of identity around which mothers may inhabit (e.g., Black mothers, Ph.D. student mothers), it is possible that mothers in recent years have carved out more specific spaces in which their mothering styles are generally reflected and supported. Questions remain as to whether or not this type of selection bias has shifted or minimized the silence of mommy wars in virtual villages. Research suggests mommy wars are likely alive and well in virtual villages for academic mothers, making a myriad of challenges in play when mothers engage in such spaces (Abetz & Moore, 2018; Gleeson et al., 2019; Mackenzie & Zhao, 2021). When considering data on harmful behaviors on social media sites, it is apparent that trolling behaviors, cyberbullying, and other forms of online discrimination and abuse are common (Bertazzo, 2021). Specifically, in 2021, Pew Research Trusts reported that 41% of respondents reported being victims of some form of aggressive and targeted behaviors on social media platforms (Bertazzo, 2021).

Given that they are situated within the cultural contexts in which privileged identities are exalted and protected (Mackenzie & Zhao, 2021), harmful behavior in virtual villages for mothers may also center on promoting of a narrow view of motherhood, with a pressure to present oneself in positive, reaffirming ways, potentially resulting in the erasure of differences in class, race, culture, and other identities. In particular, narrow views of motherhood that uphold white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy, ableism, and other "agent" or intersectionality-privileged identities (Harro, 2000) may lead to microaggressions and explicit discrimination motivated by perceived or actual differences in individuals' sociocultural status and power (Mackenzie & Zhao, 2021). Additionally, as Gibson notes, "[W]hite femininity is reproduced in popular culture" (p. 1) as white middle- and upper-class mothers have comparably more leisure or flexible work time to spend engaging socially on virtual platforms. White middle- and upper-class mothers also tend to have white-collar jobs that have supported their development and maintenance of technological skills related to the use of social media platforms. However, as millennials and Gen Zers continue to integrate social media into their daily lives through internet-connected smartphones and other devices (e.g., Gramlich, 2021), and as non-white shares of populations in countries like the United States are growing (see, e.g., Vespa et al., 2018), social media spaces increasingly offer opportunities for communicating across identity-based difference (Bouchillon, 2019). Key challenges common to many virtual villages therefore include managing the needs of diverse membership (e.g., racial, SES, geographical, professional affiliations, and political), the need to foster an understanding of group norms, and the potential issues moderating and maintaining spaces that are safe and inclusive. Such challenges also converge within normative cultural frames about motherhood that are embedded in the ethos of "mommy wars" (at least in the global west), since such a lens tends to support racialized and classed versions of motherhood, while policing or penalizing social media members who fit outside narrow parameters of privilege.

Supportive Online Communities as Sites for Scholarly Collaborations

As stated earlier, the collaborations within this book were born from interactions within a supportive online community for academic mothers*. This particular virtual village is characterized by openness, generosity, kindness, and a fierce commitment to respect for diversity, which has been intentionally cultivated since the group's conception. The scholarly work shared in this volume has become a natural extension of those ideas. There is attention paid to mothers*' voices and lived experiences: as autoethnographers, or through interview research, the contributions seek to center the experiences of academic mothers who are building both families and their careers. Many of the contributions are collaborative endeavors. In fact, some (this chapter included) are written by collectives of authors who only know each other from online interactions. This book will become a testament to the kind of supportive communities to which we wish all academic mothers* have access.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the patriarchal character of work and life in the academy, and the challenges faced by women* seeking to establish a family at the same time as establishing an academic career (Burkinshaw, 2015; Christofides et al., 2013; Taylor & Lahad, 2018; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). While some progress has been made toward a gender balance, a wide range of institutional and societal barriers remain. The COVID-19 pandemic created the perfect storm of consequences, further exposing the unsustainability of maintaining a highly engaged work life alongside parenting/familial responsibilities without a robust safety net—a so-called village.

We propose that support systems and community are central to both academic work and parenting, and there is enormous value in exploring the spaces where these communities overlap. What are the consequences of fostering and developing this proverbial virtual village? The answer may be that in the absence of the same type of physical networks that structured social and political life in the past (e.g., such as the "watercooler" interactions among coworkers), the formation of virtual villages can act as a conduit for information dissemination, support building, and ultimately creating the changes that we all so desperately seek within our society. At a time when threats to human rights for women and mothers are especially pronounced, as punctuated by the United States Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v Wade* in the summer of 2022, the need for mutual aid, collective comfort, and collective rage is especially pronounced. The stakes are high. Academic mothers are watching, together.

We end our introduction with a request to readers who are administrators or have authority within academic institutions. We implore those in power within academic institutions to carefully examine policies that may be barriers to academic mothers. Creating inclusive academic frameworks will support not only academic mothers but also faculty across campus as policies that allow spaces for academic mothers to be supported and will also support all colleagues across an institution. We hope the chapters included in this collection inspire and engage us all to do better for academic mothers.

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PART I

Identity and Marginalization

How Finding Identity with an Online Community Led to Advocacy

Cynthia M. Harley

Throughout the early part of my academic career, I received a lot of unsolicited advice surrounding motherhood. For example, I was advised to never share that I had a family or to wait until after tenure to have a child, along with other pieces of advice. I heard these sorts of things so much that I would not allow myself to want to be a mother until it was nearly too late to get pregnant. But then, after years of trying to get a tenure-track job, I thought about what I would want if I did not get that job. I wanted to be a mom. I actually felt the need to ask my boss at the time if it was okay to try to get pregnant—something which at the time seemed necessary and now is a realization of how much it was ingrained in me that it was not normal to want a tenure-track job and a baby.

When I got pregnant people changed how they treated me and they fell into two camps: either treating me as if I was no longer considered a "serious academic" or pretending that they did not notice I was pregnant. The latter would seem unproblematic until you are asked to lift a 50–75 lb

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fireproof cabinet, clean out the existing hazardous waste because it was leaking despite not having appropriate personal protective equipment, or some other such thing that a pregnant woman should never be doing, at least not without help or proper protection. When I told people I was pregnant, the responses were equally wretched. I still remember a colleague saying, "ON PURPOSE?!" Another told me that my career would be waiting if I took several years at home to raise my child; having been on hiring committees I can tell you this is not true. When I found out the waitlist for daycare at my institution was 24 months long and definitely not within a postdoc budget, I asked the university administration about how they supported student parents. They told me their students did not typically have children, so support was not needed. Indeed, at the time, it was completely unthinkable that a woman who wanted a career on the tenure-track would have a child. When I tell people about my experience, they sometimes say, "[B]ut that was a long time ago," and I respond with, "[M]y son is 6." This was not a long time ago. Things have not changed. This is the current state of things. And perhaps it goes without saying that no man would have these same conversations.

When I had my son, I felt even more isolated and dismissed as an academic. I felt like I no longer belonged in the academy. I had to fight for basic needs: a place to pump that was not a bathroom, breaks for pumping, ability to leave work if my child was sick, to be able to leave work before I was considered late for daycare pick up, and even fight for my job. In addition to this were the normal factors of being a mother like not sleeping, adapting to a new life, trying to come to terms with a body I didn't recognize, and a host of health problems because I had developed gestational hypertension and had a severe bleed while giving birth. I was vulnerable and, outside of my home, had little support.

I cannot remember who recommended that I joined a Facebook group for mothers in academia, but I did. Suddenly I found a home. I saw people like me. We were able to talk about the trials and tribulations of being academics and mothers without judgment. In this group, I was able to read stories of women who were going through the same things I was going through. This is important because our identity is a composite—fitting into a mom group can be difficult because of the limitations imposed on us by academia as a tenure-track professor: we cannot work part time, we cannot take extended leave, we are often not near family. Because of these and other factors, we don't quite fit into the other academic groups. As academic mothers, our careers may take a slight pause to care for our children and we cannot upend our lives like we could before children to move to the next job. Through this group, I found sorely needed support and mentorship. I managed to no longer feel isolated from the academy or like succeeding in the academy came at the cost of being a bad mom. I no longer felt like an academic outcast.

I understood my struggles as obstacles that I had to overcome, and frankly, I was able to overcome such obstacles because I had a supportive husband. But one day my vision of these obstacles changed. I met a young woman who had just finished her undergraduate degree and was applying to graduate school. She was clearly brilliant. She also had a 6-year-old daughter who was born at the start of her degree. She, like me, saw the struggles as obstacles that made things take a little longer, but she chose that life by choosing to be a mom. However, she was a single mother and looking at living with her child on a graduate stipend seemed to be an obstacle she might not overcome. She was extremely limited in where she could apply to schools because she needed to be near her support system. And she confided in me that she had no idea how she could afford more than rent and food on a graduate stipend and even that would be difficult. I told her that she would figure it out, trying to be cheery. Later, the whole drive home I racked my brain for how to help her.

I saw someone so talented who would likely never be able to begin her academic journey because she was a mom to a young child. I saw someone hard working enough to make it because there are fewer people working harder than a single mom working two jobs while going to school. I had no doubts that with support she would be an incredible voice in the academy. And I started thinking of how much it would take to change her situation. With some back of the envelope calculations, I figured out that about $500 a month would be more than enough for this girl to make it. I chose to write to my academic moms group to try to get suggestions. That is when I noticed that the group had 14,000 members. If each member donated one dollar, we would have enough to support **two** mothers at $500 a month.

This was how the idea of the Academic Mama Foundation was born. I recruited board members and even found a lawyer to help us apply for and receive non-profit status all within this Facebook group. Together, academic mothers from around the globe created a vision statement. Together we started raising money to support mothers. Those mothers who persevered and now had the ability to give, gave what they could to support the next generation of moms. The namesake of the organization is the same name of the very Facebook group that aided me in understanding my identity as an academic AND mom. The digital support became tangible.

In a perfect world, this organization would not have to exist because the support it provides would be embedded within academic institutions, but this world is far from perfect, and we cannot raise the money that we need to support every mother who needs it. However, we can help some academic mothers through our organization. We can bring awareness to what academic mothers face. We can dream and work for better conditions for academic mothers. Together we can help to increase diversity in the pipeline by stopping the leaks caused by the lack of maternal support.

(Un)Supported: Challenges and Opportunities Experienced by Academic Mothers of Color in Online Communities

Lisa K. Hanasono

Academic mothers of color (AMoCs) navigate myriad challenges in their professional and personal lives. At U.S. universities and colleges, AMoCs are severely underrepresented in tenured and administrative leadership positions and overrepresented in precarious part-time and untenured roles (American Council on Education, 2017a, b; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). As women of color, they experience diverse forms of discrimination (e.g., gender and racial stereotyping, tokenism, and presumptions of incompetence) situated within broader and interlocking systems of oppression (Byrd et al., 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Niemann et al., 2021). As mothers, they often face organizational barriers and members' biases associated with their caregiver status (Evans & Grant, 2008; Malisch et al., 2020; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012), and many receive inadequate institutional support (e.g., insufficient parental leave,

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lack of access to affordable childcare, and inflexible work policies). Given their intersecting identities as mothers, women of color, *and* academics, AMoCs are often tapped to take on additional uncompensated service (e.g., mentoring minoritized students, drafting parental policies, serving on diversity committees), emotional labor, and domesticized organizational work (e.g., helping everyone feel included, recording committee meeting minutes, and coordinating informal affinity groups).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated stressors and inequities for AMoCs (e.g., Cardel et al., 2020; Malisch et al., 2020). Due to the public health crisis, many childcare facilities and in-person schools abruptly closed in 2020. After reopening, many classrooms and childcare facilities experienced a series of unpredictable and ongoing closures due to COVID-19 quarantines and staffing shortages. In addition to pivoting and redesigning their college courses for online delivery, adapting their research projects to adhere to new public health policies, and shouldering additional service work, many AMoCs have been juggling simultaneously the demands of their full-time academic jobs and full-time parental duties.

Moreover, communities of color have been harmed disproportionately during the pandemic. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2021a) reported that the COVID-19 death rate was twice as high for Indigenous, Black, and Latinx people than for white people, and people of color received COVID-19 vaccinations at a disproportionately lower rate than white people (CDC, 2021b). Many AMoCs have been negatively impacted by ongoing violence and racist injustices that target people of color—including but not limited to—George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Serena Angelique Velázquez Ramos, and Vicha Ratanapakdee (Burch et al., 2020; Kozuch, 2020; Lang, 2021). Hate crimes and incidents that target people's race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender have increased in recent years (e.g., FBI, 2020, 2021; Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). For example, hate crimes targeting Asian Americans rose 73% in 2020 (Venkatraman, 2021). In addition to worrying about their own safety and well-being, AMoCs are navigating how to protect their children and families from the virus and the dangers of racism, sexism, ableism, and other systems of oppression.

In an era defined by social distancing, quarantining, remote working, and stay-at-home orders, many AMoCs are experiencing feelings of isolation and a lack of support from their academic institutions and communities (e.g., Fulweiler et al., 2021; Malisch et al., 2020). To address these challenges, AMoCs are using social media and online communities to seek support and feel more connected. Online support groups have the potential to help AMoCs expand their professional and personal networks, gain valuable parenting and career advice, receive emotional support, and learn about job and research opportunities. However, well-intentioned online support groups can be contested sites that perpetuate systems of oppression, reinforce social biases, violate privacy, and give rise to microaggressions and macroaggressions. Furthermore, online support groups often rely upon the unpaid, time-consuming labor of its moderators and members, many of whom are women, people of color, and/or caregivers.

For many AMoCs, participating in online support groups and communities is fraught with challenges and opportunities. Informed by the literature on academic motherhood (e.g., Evans & Grant, 2008; Henderson et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2020; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2015), women academics of color (e.g., Byrd et al., 2019; Niemann et al., 2021), and online social support (e.g., Hanasono & Yang, 2016; Minello et al., 2020; Quinlan & Johnson, 2019)—and featuring analyses of in-depth interviews with 42 AMoCs—this study aims to identify what specific challenges AMoCs experience in online support groups and how online support groups' moderators and group members can prevent and mitigate harm to AMoCs.

Literature Review

Seeking and Exchanging Online Support

For decades, mothers have used the internet to connect with parents and build virtual villages of support (Abetz & Moore, 2018). Ranging from small, private groups on social media sites like Facebook and WhatsApp to large public communities maintained on sites like Twitter or Reddit, mothers are using their smartphones, tablets, and computers to span vast geographic distances, make interpersonal connections, and discuss topics like breastfeeding (e.g., Robinson et al., 2019), pumping (e.g., McCaughey, 2020), postpartum depression (e.g., Stana & Miller, 2019), bereavement (e.g., Klarare et al., 2020), and being a single parent (e.g., Hartwig, 2016). These virtual villages can provide myriad benefits to members such as access to caregiving advice, a space to vent and share parenting experiences, increased social capital, and an escape from isolation and boredom (e.g., Archer & Kao, 2018; Barak et al., 2008). However, virtual villages can be problematic. From mom-shaming and ideological mommy wars (e.g., Abetz & Moore, 2018) to sharenting (i.e., disclosing information, images, or videos of one's children, see Marasli et al., 2017), spamming, making unrealistic social comparisons, and trolling (e.g., Yeshua-Katz & Segerstad, 2020), online spaces are rife with risks.

Although there is an expansive literature about how mothers communicate and exchange support in online contexts, research on mothers—especially academic mothers—tends to focus predominantly on white tenure-track faculty. To better understand the complicated ways that AMoCs are engaging in online support groups, an intersectional approach is warranted.

An Intersectional Approach

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), intersectionality provides a compelling framework to understand and nuance the diverse experiences of people, recognizing how they simultaneously hold multiple identities within broader interlocking systems of power. Collins and Bilge (2020) explained:

> Intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age—among others—as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. (p. 4)

An intersectional approach "calls for an examination of the social identities that participants bring to, and from within, systems of inequality in all their forms, and the relationships between the two" (Nichols & Stahl, 2019, p. 1266). For example, focusing on the intersection of race, gender, and class, scholars have revealed the unique experiences and challenges that women faculty of color experience in the academy related to the tenure and promotion process (e.g., Lee, 2020; Liu et al., 2019; Park, 2020; Tudor, 2020), inequitable service loads (e.g., Domingo et al., 2022; Hanasono et al., 2019), presumptions of incompetence (e.g., Niemann et al., 2021; Padilla, 2020), addressing white fragility (e.g., Joplin, 2020), and tokenism (Niemann, 2020; Turner et al., 2011). A smaller—yet valuable—body of intersectional scholarship has examined how AMoCs are navigating their professional and personal lives (e.g., Anaya, 2011; Castañeda & Isgro, 2013). However, more research is needed on how

AMoCs are navigating online networks to support their personal, professional, and relational well-being.

Research Questions

This in-depth interview study aims to address two overarching research questions:

RQ1: What challenges do AMoCs experience in online support groups?
RQ2: What actions can moderators and members of online support groups do to prevent and mitigate harm to AMoCs?

METHOD

Centering the lived experiences of AMoCs, this IRB-approved study included an online screening survey followed by an in-depth interview with each participant. Data were collected from October 2021 to February 2022. Details about this project's participants, procedures, and coding are presented in this section.

Participants

Forty-two AMoCs participated in this study. Ranging in age from 25 to 46 years (*M* = 32.05), each participant identified as a full-time faculty member, woman of color, and mother. Reflecting broader demographics of women faculty at U.S. institutions of higher education, this study's AMoC participants were predominantly non-tenure track faculty (NTTF; 31 lecturers, clinical faculty, or instructors). However, this study's sample also included pre-tenured (*n* = 9) and tenured (*n* =2) faculty. All participants self-identified as women of color. Among the 40 participants who disclosed their specific racial identities, they described themselves as Black or African American (*n* = 31), Asian or Asian American (*n* = 4), and multiracial or mixed (*n* = 5). Participants indicated they were mothers of 1 to 4 children ranging in age from 0 to 18 years.

Procedures

Responding to research study announcements and invitations on Twitter, Facebook, and faculty email listservs, AMoCs commenced their participation by clicking on a link to an online screening survey. After indicating their consent to participate, they identified their age, gender, race, and job title. To confirm their eligibility to participate in this study, they also indicated if they were a full-time faculty member, mother, and woman of color. Next, participants scheduled a one-on-one interview session with me. To reduce risk during the COVID-19 pandemic and expand this project's geographical reach, all interviews were conducted on Zoom and audio recorded. Yielding 1439 single-spaced pages of text, the recorded interviews ranged from 24 to 55.5 minutes ($M = 45.89$). After re-affirming their consent to participate in the project and session, participants were asked to talk about their identities, experiences as AMoCs, and how they joined and engaged in online support communities. Each participant received a debriefing form and a $35 Amazon e-gift card after their interview.

Positionality, Coding, and Trustworthiness

Embracing the importance of self-reflexivity in this project, I am a fourth-generation Japanese American, cisgender woman who is the mama of a 5-year-old son and the stepmom of a 21-year-old stepdaughter. In addition, I am a tenured associate professor at a public university in the United States. While I recognize that some of my shared identities with participants (e.g., being a woman of color at a predominantly white institution, as well as a full-time faculty member, mother, and academic who does not live near extended family members) may have helped establish rapport and a sense of common ground, I also recognize some specific privileges that I hold (e.g., being a U.S. citizen and having parents who earned their graduate degrees at research intensive universities) shape my experiences and social location. For example, as a tenured faculty member, I am afforded a higher level of job security and voting privileges through shared governance mechanisms at my university. My spouse is also a tenured faculty member, which means our household is supported by dual incomes, and we coordinate our schedules and commitments to co-parent our kids. During the interviews and data coding, I prioritized centering, listening, and attending to my participants' unique stories, feelings, and ideas.

I used Lawless and Chen's (2019) critical thematic analysis (CTA) to examine the interview data and reach theoretical saturation. Informed by earlier forms of thematic analyses (e.g., Owen, 1984), CTA uses a two-step process to critically analyze richly qualitative data such as interviews.

After familiarizing myself with the data and my field notes, I engaged initially in *open coding*, where I examined closely discursive patterns in the recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness of topics, issues, and ideas related to the challenges AMoCs experience in online support groups and how online support groups' moderators and group members can prevent and mitigate harm to AMoCs. Second, I completed the step of *closed coding* by making connections between the initial codes (which emerged from my interviewees' discourse) and broader ideologies. Lawless and Chen (2019) explained, "Step 2 asks the researcher to consider what ideologies, positions of power, or status hierarchies are recurring, repeated, and forceful" (p. 99). To increase the trustworthiness of my analyses, I conducted member checks. The findings are reported in the next section.

Findings

Recognizing the nuances of their intersecting identities, this study aimed to identify core challenges AMoCs experience in online support groups and how these groups' moderators and members can prevent and mitigate harm to AMoCs. Participants indicated they were members of myriad support groups in different digital spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Slack. For reasons discussed below, participants tended to be members of online support groups that aligned with one or more of their social identities as mothers, academics, women of color, single-parents, international faculty, or members of religious groups. For example, multiple participants recalled their experiences in various Facebook groups that were exclusive to academic mothers and Black academic mothers. A few participants discussed their successes and challenges of finding connections, support groups, and a sense of community among academics on Twitter, and three participants shared their experiences exchanging support with their university colleagues on WhatsApp. Although each platform offered unique features, a distinct set of overarching themes related to this study's two research questions emerged. In this section, I address key findings related to these two areas of interest.

Key Challenges

Ranging from a sense of connection and words of encouragement to life-saving medical advice, helpful parenting tips, and substantial financial assistance, participants shared success stories of how they received valuable and timely support from members of online groups. It is important to note that online spaces can play an important role in supporting the personal health, relational well-being, social capital, and professional success of AMoCs. That said, participants identified a collection of key challenges that prevented them from getting the quantity and quality of support they were seeking online.

Access and Gatekeeping To begin, participants identified a lack of access and gatekeeping as fundamental challenges in seeking and receiving high quality support. Specifically, many online support groups—especially those designed to serve minoritized mothers and academics—are hidden or private from public access. Participants often needed to be plugged into broader social networks and trusted relationships to learn that these support groups existed. For example, Shannon indicated that a colleague introduced her to an online group that focused on academic caregivers, and Hanna shared that she first learned about an online affinity group when her friend sent her a personal link to join. Without these *a priori* connections, the participants would not have known about these supportive communities.

Once participants learned about these online spaces, they frequently faced several layers of gatekeeping from group moderators and platforms. For example, Eli explained, "I answered a few [screening survey] questions like 'are you a mother or a mother-to-be' … and then 'are you Black?'" Some participants noted that they had to answer a series of open-ended questions (e.g., "Why do you want to join this group?" and "[T]o verify your identity as an academic, please copy and paste the link to your university's official faculty webpage here") and agree to abide by the online group's community rules before moderators granted them access.

Hiding online support groups and requiring gatekeeping processes like member screening surveys can be advantageous in protecting members' privacy and preventing unauthorized outsiders from joining protected online communities. It can also foster feelings and perceptions that the online community is a safer or more secure space from the general public. However, the hidden nature of these groups, along with the extra gatekeeping features, can potentially prevent some AMoCs (especially those who are socially isolated and not connected to extant networks of power) from learning about these groups, getting the support they need, and joining broader online communities of care. Eva explained, "Right, so I mean I'm still trying to find my village. And I'm trying to find support."

Self-efficacy in Seeking Support Once AMoCs became members of online groups, some shared concerns about their self-efficacy or ability to effectively seek support—especially from online groups with hundreds or thousands of members whom they had never met in person. Participants expressed concerns that these members might judge, shame, or embarrass them, and some participants worried that members would violate their online groups' privacy guidelines by screenshotting their comments or gossiping about their posts to friends and coworkers. For example, Leeza discussed a time when she hesitated to seek support to help a colleague who had been raped. Although she urgently needed advice and emotional support, she feared that her efforts to seek online support might compromise her colleague's privacy (i.e., group members might look up Leeza's faculty profile and academic department and then possibly identify the name of her colleague who had been raped). Many participants were reticent to share vulnerable or private details in their online communities.

Recognizing her reticence to seek support, Christina stated, "I have a really hard time asking for help or support … it's partly because, you know, I grew up in this giant family, I was an older kid, and I was always the one and [am] still the one to help others." Rooting her identity as a caregiver and helper, Christina disclosed subsequently that she was more likely to participate in online support groups to help others and read discussion threads than to pose questions and solicit support.

Inadequate and Harmful Support Seeking support can require people to share their vulnerabilities, insecurities, and problems with group members. Interviewees acknowledged they sometimes hesitated to reach out to group members in fear of being judged, attacked, or further harmed. Unfortunately, some of their fears were warranted, as a core challenge for many AMoCs was receiving inadequate or poor quality "support." First, some participants discussed their experience of reaching out to their online groups for support only to be met with silence. Jennifer, for example, noted, "I asked questions about something I'm doing at the moment, and then I don't get answers." Minna shared a similar experience where she reached out to an online community for immediate help and did not receive any responses for days. By the time group members addressed her original post, it was too late.

While some participants expressed frustration about receiving delayed or no support during their time of need, other participants discussed how these online groups and communities can serve as toxic sites for the exchange of low quality or harmful “support.” For example, participants noted that some well-intentioned group members readily provided dangerous and misguided advice. Amanda explained:

> I remember this lady [who was a woman of color]. She came online and she was complaining about how her husband was racist and she really loved him. And she was trying to, you know, make him understand [her] point of view. He actually hit her … so much physical violence. … And all I saw from the group was the advice to beat him up. … To me, at a point I just felt like the lady needs to understand that she has to move out for her personal safety. … Well it’s kind of annoying to know there are people out there who give bad advice.

Participants also shared examples where group members offered insensitive messages of support, and some discussed experiences where efforts to seek support were met with harsh criticism, trolling, and cyberbullying. For example, Tay discussed an experience where she witnessed online group members mock a woman who was suicidal. Tay explained, “She was talking about what her issue was [with her boyfriend.] And then people started to call her clingy … and I think she attempted to commit suicide. … What she needed was just some words of encouragement.” Hanna recalled incidents where group members sought support only to be accused of lying or being overly dramatic, and Em talked about how she was “mom-shamed” (i.e., when a mother criticizes the caregiving behaviors or skills of another mother) in an online group.

Acknowledging the impersonal nature of large online groups and limitations of asynchronous communication, Nia noted, “You know, people complain all the time. Whatever. But also, people complain on [social media]. It’s full of complaints.” Some participants pondered if group members would be as emboldened to communicate harsh and hurtful messages to others in face-to-face interactions or if the digital modalities and asynchronous interactions might facilitate the prevalence of problematic interactions.

Invisible (and Erased) Labor As mothers, women of color, and highly educated professionals, participants often received requests for their expertise in these online spaces. From questions about parenting and advice on how to navigate difficult discussions about race to discipline-specific inquiries (e.g., faculty with expertise in herpetology were asked to comment if a particular snake was venomous, medical faculty were asked to provide free health advice), AMoCs frequently found themselves sharing their expertise and advice with other group members during their off-work hours. This form of labor—often underappreciated and unpaid—was largely invisible.

For example, in larger online groups that catered to academic caregivers and faculty, participants noticed that women of color were often asked by white women to educate members about issues, histories, and concepts related to race. And when group members communicated racial microaggressions, people often waited for women of color to intervene and call out others' problematic behaviors. Recalling a similar experience, Shannon stated, "There have been a few instances that I can remember of people saying things that were microaggressions … where it was the people of color who saw it, and then we're like doing all the explaining." She noted the racial fatigue that she and AMoCs experience in these online spaces where they were simultaneously targeted due to their racial and gender identities *and* then expected to do the work of educating the offenders and helping the online group heal and move forward together.

Participants expressed concerns about the inequitable and invisible labor that AMoCs tended to perform in online groups. They also expressed concerns about the erasure of their labor through a problematic practice called dirty deleting, where one group member (often embarrassed or ashamed about something they wrote online) deletes an entire discussion thread that contains their original post *and* posts by other members. Reflecting on the harmful impact of dirty deleting, Shannon explained that "the labor of the people explaining [what the dirty deleter said or did that was offensive] and the time is now erased." While reflecting on these experiences, participants expressed concern about the ways other members literally erased or silenced their comments through the practice of dirty deleting and repeatedly centering cisgender whiteness.

Centering Cisgender Whiteness AMoCs discussed how online groups and communities that centered cisgender whiteness could be unwelcoming, unrelatable, and generally unsupportive. Some participants described interactions with group members who made racist or sexist posts, while some participants focused on the unchecked privilege that permeated some online groups. A participant named W discussed why she decided to leave an online community whose members were predominantly middle class and wealthy white women:

> I couldn't see myself in these posters' shoes. There's a lot of posts that are being made, and I'm just like, "how is this a problem for you, in particular, when you have all these resources? You have a grandmother who's willing to pamper your child with whatever, and I am alone with literally nobody in the world." I have to navigate the added layer of living in this world as a person of color but also parenting a child of color, and I don't think any of that is really captured into these conversations … and then I very quickly realized none of our situations are the same. [A white women group member with economic privilege] can actually afford to cut [family] ties, but her problems are like, "So my father made reservations to go on this yacht." It's just mind blowing. A different universe, that I lived in, compared to hers.

Similarly, Cassandra reflected on her experiences as a former member of a large online group for academic women:

> I had to step away, 'cause [a group member who was a white woman] was like "oh, we're all in this together, because we're fighting [for women's rights]." Sorry, that's white woman feminism. If it's not a fight for the most marginalized, then what you are fighting for is yourself.

Repeatedly, AMoCs who were seeking solace and support in online spaces often experienced moments of disconnect with wealthy white cisgender women members. Some participants disclosed they intentionally left online groups that were unwelcoming and unsupportive. Given these challenges, what can be done to better support AMoCs? The next section presents a collection of recommendations on how online group moderators and members can prevent or mitigate harm to AMoCs.

Recommendations for Moderators and Members

Moderators: Transparency, Teamwork, and Training Moderators have the power to gatekeep, facilitate, and regulate group members' interactions and engagement. They can set ground rules and cultivate a welcoming climate for group members. Despite their importance, participants noted that individuals often assumed the role of a moderator haphazardly or by default (e.g., the person who established a social media group was designated automatically as a moderator by the social media platform). For example, Star noted that the moderator or admin of her groups "was just the person that created the group," and Tay reflected, "I don't know how the group was created, so I don't know [how people became the group's moderators]." Put simply, the pathway to becoming a moderator lacked transparency and intentionality, and the length of their leadership term was unclear. Moving forward, online groups and communities could clarify moderators' roles, term lengths, and selection processes (e.g., elections vs. appointments or volunteering).

Because online groups are available 24/7, it can be advantageous to create teams of moderators with clear protocols for responding to group members' queries and conflicts in a timely manner. This practice may also prevent unilateral decisions from one moderator and diffuse decision-making to a larger group of people. Moreover, participants recommended formal trainings for moderators. Hanna explained, "There should be a kind of training for the moderators on how to deal with … different backgrounds. The moderators have to manage all these things to bring the best out of the [online] community." Given their central role, more support should be directed to moderators to set them up for success.

Participants noted that moderators usually were volunteers who did not receive formal compensation for vetting potential members, managing conflict among group members, removing problematic people, monitoring discussions, and encouraging members to engage with each other. Alicia stated bluntly, "I know it's a hard job, and it's a volunteer job." Ari reflected, "I don't notice [the moderator's] role that much. Once in a while they'll do something. They'll [post a message or announcement and] be like, 'I'm the moderator and I could help with this.' And I'm like, wow, that's really generous of you." Some participants pontificated about the potential of compensating moderators for their labor and time; however, the logistics and resources needed to enact this recommendation remain unaddressed.

Moderators and Members: Hyping and Celebratory Support Participants expressed an interest in the provision of more proactive support and positive communication in their online groups and communities. In addition to offering emotional, informational, and tangible support to members in need (i.e., a more reactive approach), participants recommended the proactive implementation of weekly rituals that celebrated members' successes and accomplishments (i.e., hype posts). Cassandra said, "It's not just about negativity. In fact, most of the things said is celebrating—like 'welcome this new member' and 'this person just won this award' and 'here are some more opportunities.' I think that what's needed. You know, academia is built on this tearing down model. We need a space [to build each other up]." Some participants noted how online communities can increase members' social capital by celebrating and rendering more salient people's accomplishments and accolades. From periodic posts that invite members to share their weekly wins to encouraging members to announce upcoming research talks, media events, calls for papers, and grant opportunities, online groups can serve as a powerful site for proactively recognizing and amplifying members' achievements.

Members: Safer Affinity Spaces and Holding Each Other Accountable Recognizing how some online groups can be toxic spaces—especially for mothers of color and academics in precarious job positions—some participants recommended joining affinity groups where all members were connected by one or more intersecting identities (e.g., online communities for Black mothers or a support group for non-tenure track women faculty of color). These groups strategically bring people with similar experiences and identities together, thereby removing the need for certain forms of extra emotional labor (e.g., needing to educate others about racial microaggressions or codeswitching) and creating safer spaces to discuss vulnerable topics. Eli talked about her experiences with an online affinity group, "It was just for Black women, so it was really helpful. … I think it will just make it more comfortable for people to come on [the group's site] and talk about personal things like pregnancy and their babies." Alicia discussed her experiences as part of an online group for academic mothers. She said, "I think it's just helpful to hear that people are going through the same thing and that you know I'm not alone." Online affinity groups have the potential to reduce AMoCs' feelings of isolation and exchange social support with people who share similar identities and experiences.

In addition to self-selecting into safer online spaces, such as affinity groups, individual members can use online platforms' features to curate their digital interactions and mitigate harm. Participants shared a variety of strategies such as blocking or reporting problematic group members, increasing online privacy settings (e.g., limiting others' access to their personal information and profiles), leaving or unfollowing unsupportive online groups, and limiting one's daily consumption of social media or digital communication. Participants also noted the importance of clear ground rules that are embraced and actively followed by group members. Recognizing the dangers of screenshots and privacy breaches, Nworah explained that one of her online groups stated that “no posts or statements … can be shared in any other group,” and Eli explained her groups had rules against spamming members and the use of hate speech. Additional guidelines included the banning of multilevel marketing (MLM), cyberbullying, and private messaging group members without their permission. Individually and collectively, group members can play an important part in making online groups more welcoming, safe, and supportive for AMoCs.

Discussion

Using an intersectional approach, the purpose of this in-depth interview study was to identify key challenges AMoCs experience in online support groups and offer practical recommendations to these groups’ moderators and members. AMoCs face myriad challenges while navigating their faculty careers, and the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately disrupted their research, elevated their academic workloads and caregiving responsibilities, and increased feelings of isolation and uncertainty. The longstanding inequities that AMoCs face, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic, are complicated and must be addressed at institutional, interpersonal, and individual levels (e.g., Gonzales & Griffin, 2020; Malisch et al., 2020). To complement and extend the institutional work (e.g., policy changes, resource allocations, and programming) that is needed to reduce systemic inequities, this study focused on individual and interpersonal efforts to support AMoCs during and after the pandemic.

Key Findings and Implications

This study’s findings largely are consistent with scholarship about online support groups. Participants in this study, for example, experienced challenges that are common to many people who seek and exchange support online—such as receiving inadequate or harmful “support,” experiencing privacy breaches, and dealing with difficult or hostile group members (e.g., Archer et al., 2021; Hanasono & Yang, 2016). However, given AMoCs’ unique intersecting identities—especially related to gender, race, parental status, socioeconomic status, and employment precarity—these challenges manifested in distinct ways.

First, participants expressed concerns about accessing and gaining entry to the limited number of specialized online support spaces that were designed specifically for people who are simultaneously women of color, mothers, and/or full-time faculty. To protect members' privacy, these groups were often hidden from public view and open searches; so AMoCs often needed a friend or professional contact to inform them about the group or send a personal invitation to join. Because AMoCs often experience isolation and can be excluded from professional networks of power, learning about and accessing these online communities may be particularly challenging.

Second, AMoCs addressed the invisible (and sometimes erased) labor that they provided in online communities. Researchers have found that women faculty of color often perform a disproportionately high level of invisible and uncompensated labor at the workplace such as mentoring minoritized students/faculty and serving on DEI task forces (e.g., Domingo et al., 2022; Hanasono et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019). This study highlights how AMoCs are experiencing additional forms of identity and cultural taxation (Padilla, 1994; Rideau, 2021) beyond their workplaces and when they are off the clock—even when they might be seeking support online from other people. From incurring the emotional labor costs of calling out racist, sexist, or classist actions by group members to responding to inquiries about parenting or more specialized topics related to their research expertise (e.g., asking faculty with expertise in immunology to answer questions about COVID-19 vaccines), AMoCs' experiences revealed how online support groups often replicate in-person demands on their labor, time, and expertise. They also discussed how their labor could be uniquely erased in online communities when other group members dirty deleted discussion threads that contained their thoughtful posts and advice.

Third, AMoCs discussed challenges they experienced with participating in online groups that centered cisgender whiteness. AMoCs disclosed they often couldn't relate to the struggles, concerns, and experiences of online group members who did not acknowledge their racial, financial, or cisgender privilege. Several participants felt dismissed or mom-shamed by other group members when they discussed non-Western parenting methods, and some AMoCs decided to leave online groups due to the prevalence of macroaggressions and microaggressions. These hostile spaces may incur further emotional distress on AMoCs who were simply searching for a supportive community.

Fortunately, there are specific actions that online group moderators and members can take to prevent and mitigate harm. Participants spoke repeatedly about the importance of moderators. From establishing clear ground rules and screening new members to intervening when participants reported problems, moderators carry a considerable amount of power and responsibility. However, participants indicated that the process and mechanisms for becoming a moderator were often unclear and that many moderators could benefit from formal training. Participants also remarked that moderating online support groups was another form of secret service (i.e., invisible and undervalued labor, see Hanasono et al., 2019) and some suggested online groups find sustainable ways to compensate and appreciate moderators.

In addition, moderators and members can work together to make online groups more proactively supportive. Instead of simply reacting and responding to group members' crises and queries, online support groups can work intentionally to celebrate or hype group members' successes and accomplishments. From posting a "weekly wins" thread for group members to announce and celebrate their achievements to creating discussion posts and threads about new jobs, upcoming speaking events, calls for papers, and other professional opportunities, participants discussed how online groups might work more strategically and synergistically to increase members' social capital, visibility, and career advancement.

Conclusion

This project provides an important step in understanding the complicated challenges that AMoCs experience in online groups and communities, and it provides practical recommendations for moderators and group members. The exploratory nature of this study, however, introduces some limitations that might serve as the impetus for future research. First, this study's sample was predominantly NTTF. The inclusion of more NTTF participants is advantageous as research on academic mothers focuses predominantly on tenure-stream faculty (e.g., Miller & Riley, 2022; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2015) despite rising numbers of NTTF at institutions of higher education (NCES, 2020). However, NTTF compose a diverse range of faculty ranks and positions (e.g., clinical professors, assistant teaching professors, senior lecturers, instructors, professors of practice), and more research is needed to understand the nuanced and unique challenges that are experienced by NTTF.

In addition, this study focused solely on the experiences and recommendations of full-time faculty. Future research should include the perspectives of academic mothers who are graduate students, undergraduates, part-time faculty, staff, and university administrators. Future research should also examine how additional identities such as age, disability, class, religious affiliation, and ethnicity intersect in the context of online social support.

Second, this study examined participants' reflections and recalled experiences in online groups and communities. Future research could analyze the actual interactions and messages exchanged by AMoCs in online support groups over a prolonged period—both to examine the distinct verbal and nonverbal message features that members share and to explore any patterns of communication among online group members via social network analyses. This approach might also reveal how AMOCs engage in online coalition and community building with group members who have different marginalized identities (e.g., Queer white academic mothers, academic fathers of color).

Finally, more research is needed on how institutions of higher education can facilitate and complement the support that AMoCs are seeking and receiving in online spaces. What can universities, colleges, and departments do to better support AMoCs as they navigate the (un)written rules of academia and advance their careers? How can institutions of higher education create and sustain in-person affinity groups and supportive spaces to complement extant online communities?

In closing, this study reveals some of the complicated challenges experienced by full-time faculty who hold intersecting identities of being mothers and women of color. This project also provides practical recommendations for better supporting AMoCs in online spaces and communities. As academic and digital landscapes continue to evolve, more research will be needed to understand the complex interplay of online communities and the ways they can support AMoCs.

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Barefoot Strangers: Multinational Digital Epistemologies of Academic Moms, *Mamás*, *Mamy*, *Umahat*

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Positionality: Our Collective "We"

We are a writing collective of five academic mom, *mamá*, *mamy*, *umahat* scholars who started working together as a small group derived from a larger *collectiva* of 16 academic women working on Gendered Academic Productivity (GAP) formed during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic era. We started working on data collection for a joint publication thus reflecting closely on our positionality as insider researchers—we found a shared affinity, a camaraderie that was both inspiring and very much needed during uncertain times. Although appearing incidental at first, our demographics either overlapped or complemented. We, the authors, represent four countries, four languages, multiple disciplines, and various career stages, but our key commonality (aside from now working barefoot) is as academic moms, *mamás*, *umahat*, *mamy*. Now, we position ourselves not only as colleagues or part of an ongoing research collective, but as friends. This is our story.

At the beginning of 2020 we were strangers. Our only common intersection was as women academics in the Facebook group *I Should Be Writing*. At the onset of the pandemic, and with fluctuating stay-at-home orders during COVID-19, the pivot of a digital first and second space blended into a third place (i.e., personal and professional). In this shared virtual space, the five authors of this chapter accepted a call to participate in a qualitative research project about Gendered Academic Productivity with 11 other female academics—who were at that time generally working from home, often barefoot, and boxed-in as well—into a research collective with strangers across the world (learn more at https://covidgap.sites.adler.edu/).

The phenomena of this experience involved synchronous meetings and asynchronous connections, resulting in multilateral relations and academic productivity, blurring the real and the virtual. It also fulfilled a need we didn't know was there—of a kind and understanding academic companionship birthed from our shared struggles and sorority-induced relief. We created academic outputs relevant and important to us across disciplinary boundaries in a place—a collaborative digital setting—that we did not know could work, and which would not have occurred for us as a group without the looming pandemic. We met from behind our screens, in our homes, as the world pivoted to this digital third space. This was an alternative online cooperative moving from the first space (private, cultured, nuanced) and second space (imposed, professional, societal) to a public, shared, social third space online (Bhabha, 2004; Moran, 2018).

Yet, as this relationship has entered back into a world of pre-Covid conventions (we dare not call it a new normal, which we will discuss later in this contribution), our understanding and functioning has returned to a fluid intersection which has an added layer of chaos (e.g., on-campus activities, kids' extracurricular activities). We have returned to some of our spaces with new shoes, masked, vaccinated, and with a consternation of our roles that was not previously present. However, through this experience with isolation and relationship building across blue lights and black screens, we have emerged with a deeper understanding of who we are and a dominant skill of flexibility to guide us forth as mothers-academics (plus all the other labels that cape our identity).

In this chapter, we explore the hyphen of the research-mothering through a world subordinated to technology (Liberati, 2016, p. 189) through poly-ethnography to enhance our distinct, diverse voices. Using this design helped us better understand this lived phenomenon, through polyvocal storytelling with a goal to enhance future digital relationships and digitally supporting motherhood (Arthur et al., 2017; DeCino & Strear, 2019; Johansson & Jones, 2019; Kassan et al., 2020). In our collective encounters, we acknowledge our positionality and how the knowledge we co-produced is situated in the context and in our individual experiences. The virtual spaces we cohabited served as a place for the construction and reconstruction of identities because in these spaces, we, the participants, engaged in an "act of articulation and writing oneself into being" (Boyd, 2008, p. 153).

Boxed in the Fem-Hyphen

We acknowledge that virtual spaces change the ways in which we interact with each other "opening up new horizons for the conditions of 'being' human" (Kim, 2001, p. 107). Through these openings, we use our critical conversations to process our hyphenated mother-academic experiences in digital spaces (Fine, 1994; Omanović, 2019). As Liberati (2016) believes:

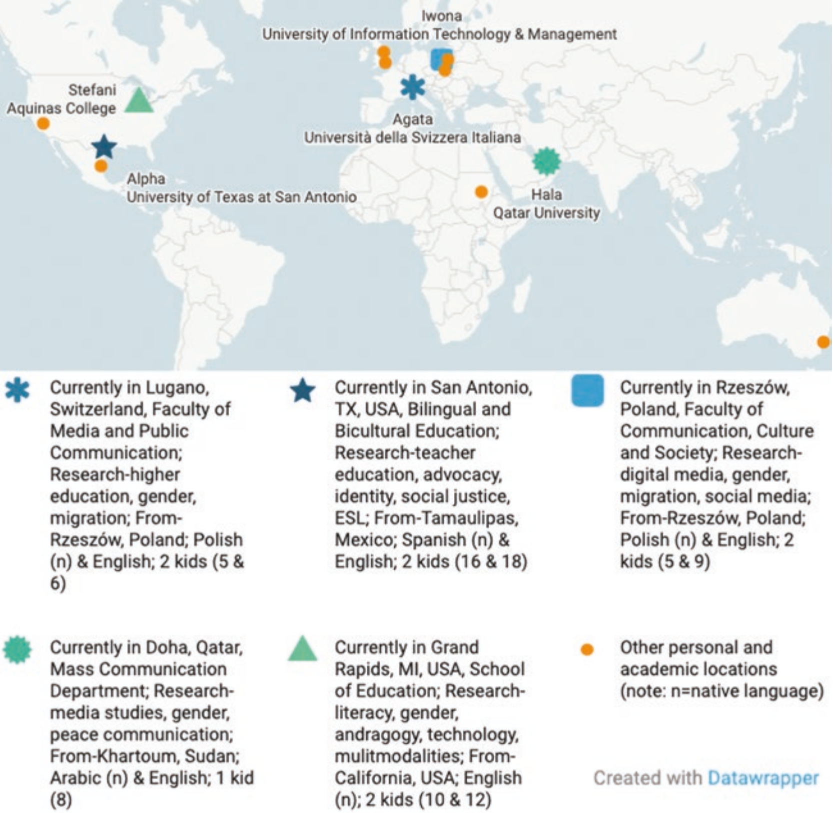
> We are surrounded by technologies that interact with us providing information, knowledge and perceptions [where] technology allows us to enlarge the world where we live, but it is not clear in which way such an enlargement

> is produced. It is not clear if technology yields a modification related to our perceptual world or a 'mere' amplification of our knowledge. (p. 200)

Along with Fine's (1994) hyphenated space of self-other, our exploration is also framed through a feminist lens to understand these intersections of our digital selves (hooks, 1994). We didn't know we would participate in an unknown digital upgrade; the pandemic challenged our epistemologies to highlight our hyphens—blending: mothers, homemakers, feminist scholars, researchers, homeschoolers—to not only understand ourselves but to share hope and community for others.

The spirit of mothering through this academia-centered collaboration guided us to provide our subjective stances. We wanted to make sense of this inclusive digital human experience as we combined our professional and personal selves during the global pandemic (hooks, 2000; Fine, 1994). We are grounding our voices on third space and feminist theories, where we share women-centric digital lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic life, and, further, we employ a sociocultural lens in the form of third space theory to examine the ways we navigated our digital selves (Anzaldúa, 1987, 2009; Bhabha, 2004; Keating, 2009). We define our lived third spaces as shared liminal-digital settings where we are a hybrid of our multiple identities and where we encounter our thriving hyphenated selves.

The interpretation of this phenomenon will be presented as interwoven vignettes among us/co-authors. This insider role identified how we succeeded in our dynamic collaborative research across ethnicities, languages, disciplines, and time zones (Kassan et al., 2020; Norris et al., 2012; Werbińska, 2020). Stories were told through a juxtaposition of relationships in multiple modalities in research and beyond, thus creating a subculture among those who know the story (Norris et al., 2012). Our conversations were guided through digital storytelling, collaboration, and processing in digital settings. In other words, we engaged in a co-constructed (Staniscuaski et al., 2021) dialogical internet/digital-based exchange of our lived experiences as women, mothers, and scholars from various cultures, with different sociocultural backgrounds, working oftentimes in multiple languages in the same professional and private setting (see Fig. 1, at time of research). Through this chapter we engage in presenting and unpacking the reflections of our similarities but also our differences that enriched our shared experiences and transformed our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Currently in San Antonio, TX, USA, Bilingual and Bicultural Education; Research-teacher education, advocacy, identity, social justice, ESL; From-Tamaulipas, Mexico; Spanish (n) & English; 2 kids (16 & 18)
Currently in Rzeszów, Poland, Faculty of Communication, Culture and Society; Research-digital media, gender, migration, social media; From-Rzeszów, Poland; Polish (n) & English; 2 kids (5 & 9)
Currently in Doha, Qatar, Mass Communication Department; Research-media studies, gender, peace communication; From-Khartoum, Sudan; Arabic (n) & English; 1 kid (8)
Currently in Grand Rapids, MI, USA, School of Education; Research-literacy, gender, andragogy, technology, mulitmodalities; From-California, USA; English (n); 2 kids (10 & 12)
Other personal and academic locations (note: n=native language)
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Fig. 1 Where our feet rest

professional vision while informing our *hafiyat*, *descalza*, *boso*, barefoot identities at the same time.

Research Design and Procedure: A Poly-ethnography of Our Digital Selves

We build our story on the conceptualization of autoethnography as a method that turns the lens toward the researchers not as a subject of research but rather a site of critical interrogation of the larger social, cultural, and political contexts through a dialogical exploration of the researchers' lived experiences (Brown et al., 2016; Sawyer & Norris, 2013). As we interrogated the hyphen of our research experience, we engaged in a polyvocal and reflexive conversation with each other—poly-ethnography—where we were both researchers and participants (Johansson & Jones, 2019) to further process our digital selves during an unknown, isolating time. Zazkis and Koichu (2015) define duo[poly]ethnography as identifying, describing, and explaining phenomena; we present them in development, as such phenomena are an effect of "an ongoing negotiation which is socially mediated, spatially situated and deeply felt" (Johansson & Jones, 2019, p. 1528).

To make meaning of the research-mothering phenomena, we used multiple digital modes. We recognize the voices in our interactions and this sense-making exercise is distinct and unique, yet "each voice always contains the voices of others" (Frank, 2005, p. 966). We acknowledge that our values, beliefs, life histories, and experiences impact the way we construct meaning about the world around us. Sawyer and Norris (2015) argue that being both polyvocal and dialogic is a key tenet of poly-ethnography, because through the varied voices, poly-ethnography brings out differences and promotes a multi-voiced criticality. We are building our perception of this collaboration and its effects based on dialogue as a mode of inquiry—the conversation of two or more participants or "the interactional communication process of creating, interpreting, and negotiating meaning and common understanding of ideas" (Schramm, 1997). Dialogical method is not new in humanities and social sciences methodologies (see MacInnis and Portelli (2002) for an overview). As an inquiry approach and insight building device, dialogue has been analyzed for centuries among philosophers and researchers (e.g., Nikolai Bakhtin) for whom individual voices are formed as part of a process, involving anticipation of, and response to, the voices of others (Frank, 2005, p. 966; Holquist, 1990)—as the simplest way to cross boundaries and barriers between individuals (hooks, 1994, p. 130). By utilizing poly-ethnography and digitally mediated dialogue we hoped to understand the phenomena of these hyphens (e.g., mother, researcher, participant) and enhance future digital relationships and co-writing experiences through a polyvocal, lived narrative (Arthur et al., 2017). While actively engaging in constructing and then reconstructing our experiences to interpret our digital access, needs, and forms of inquiry to identify our transformation and relationships as digital beings (Koonce

& Lewis, 2020), we reflected on our own and each other's perspectives to embrace those differences (as suggested by DeCino & Strear, 2019) which we share here ingenuously.

Digital Setting

Our virtual site/space started from a social media post which acted as a catalyst for the phenomena we examine here (this hyphenated space of synchronous and asynchronous) mixing in professional and personal spaces to understand our digital selves. It is a process that is "live[d] and told, yet based on difference" (Werbińska, 2020, p. 2710). The specificity of the research context presented here is that our dialogues took place in a digital setting and reflect our insider subjectivity to identify transformation and dynamic collaborative research across nations, languages, and disciplines (Norris et al., 2012; Werbińska, 2020).

We are using insider research that is naturally occurring in a digital space—this digital space is our instrument (Paulus & Lester, 2021). The natural digital instruments included emails, texts, social media (e.g., Facebook, Slack), synchronous virtual interactions, and digital tools (e.g., apps, screenshots). Our collaborative digital setting included synchronous meetings and co-working sessions as pictured in Fig. 2, personal connections via social media platforms (see, e.g., Fig. 3), and asynchronous co-writing in documents shared online. This digital setting supported our unexpected academic productivity during a time when our professional lives were negatively affected by the pandemic and stay-at-home orders. More importantly, however, it has and continues to fulfill a need we didn't know was essential to our wellbeing during the pandemic and beyond it—we were all stewards in need of a community of mothers, women, researchers, and scholars. This new way of intense collaboration with strangers, not only based across different continents and time zones, but also having their feet firmly dug in behind different disciplinary boundaries, would not have worked or occurred without the pandemic—indeed a silver lining.

The limitations of this digital third space sometime included limited internet access, device availability (e.g., family sharing), and physical location (e.g., working initially from our bedrooms and living rooms, but eventually moving to work everywhere). Yet, these limitations also encourage some forced breaks from screens, thus producing a positive outcome.

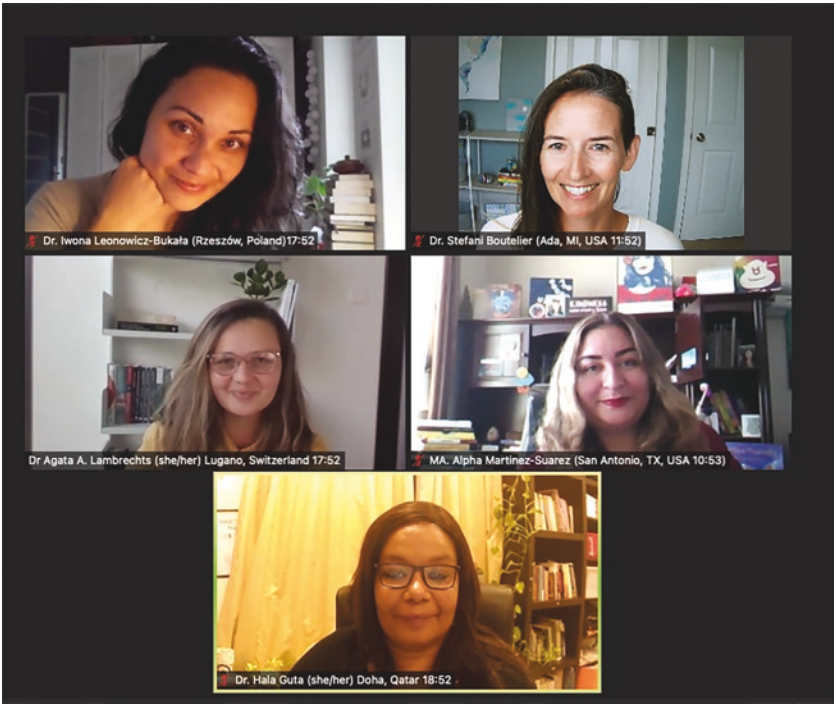
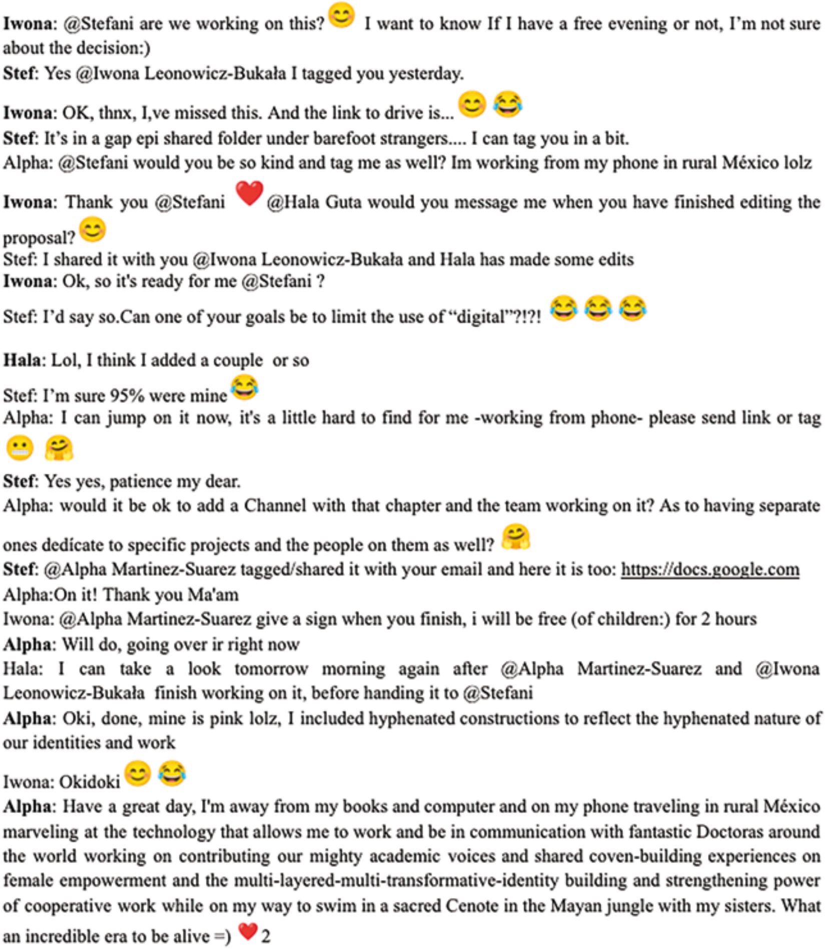

Dr. Iwona Leonowicz-Bukała (Rzeszów, Poland)17:52
Dr. Stefani Boutelier (Ada, MI, USA 11:52)
Dr Agata A. Lambrechts (she/her) Lugano, Switzerland 17:52
MA. Alpha Martinez-Suarez (San Antonio, TX, USA 10:53)
Dr. Hala Guta (she/her) Doha, Qatar 18:52

Fig. 2 Zoom collaboration (synchronous)

Digital Dialogues

Relying on this multiplicity of voice we engaged in digital storytelling where topics were prompted. We reflectively provided answers to these questions (via Slack, Zoom, collaborative documents, etc.) while concurrently benefiting through this expansion (Damrow & Sweeney, 2019) to further understand our digital selves (i.e., the hyphens). The topics posed were rather informal and always open-ended, for example:

- The impact of the pandemic on our processing (e.g., organizing, efficiency, understanding, distraction), especially the effects of digital academic collaboration for our digital identity, reflexivity, and epistemology.



Iwona: @Stefani are we working on this? 😊 I want to know If I have a free evening or not, I'm not sure about the decision:)
Stef: Yes @Iwona Leonowicz-Bukała I tagged you yesterday.
Iwona: OK, thnx, I,ve missed this. And the link to drive is... 😊 😂
Stef: It's in a gap epi shared folder under barefoot strangers.... I can tag you in a bit.
Alpha: @Stefani would you be so kind and tag me as well? Im working from my phone in rural México lolz
Iwona: Thank you @Stefani ❤️ @Hala Guta would you message me when you have finished editing the proposal? 😊
Stef: I shared it with you @Iwona Leonowicz-Bukała and Hala has made some edits
Iwona: Ok, so it's ready for me @Stefani ?
Stef: I'd say so.Can one of your goals be to limit the use of "digital"?!?! 😂 😂 😂
Hala: Lol, I think I added a couple or so
Stef: I'm sure 95% were mine 😂
Alpha: I can jump on it now, it's a little hard to find for me -working from phone- please send link or tag 😬 🤗
Stef: Yes yes, patience my dear.
Alpha: would it be ok to add a Channel with that chapter and the team working on it? As to having separate ones dedicate to specific projects and the people on them as well? 🤗
Stef: @Alpha Martinez-Suarez tagged/shared it with your email and here it is too: https://docs.google.com
Alpha:On it! Thank you Ma'am
Iwona: @Alpha Martinez-Suarez give a sign when you finish, i will be free (of children:) for 2 hours
Alpha: Will do, going over ir right now
Hala: I can take a look tomorrow morning again after @Alpha Martinez-Suarez and @Iwona Leonowicz-Bukała finish working on it, before handing it to @Stefani
Alpha: Oki, done, mine is pink lolz, I included hyphenated constructions to reflect the hyphenated nature of our identities and work
Iwona: Okidoki 😊 😂
Alpha: Have a great day, I'm away from my books and computer and on my phone traveling in rural México marveling at the technology that allows me to work and be in communication with fantastic Doctoras around the world working on contributing our mighty academic voices and shared coven-building experiences on female empowerment and the multi-layered-multi-transformative-identity building and strengthening power of cooperative work while on my way to swim in a sacred Cenote in the Mayan jungle with my sisters. What an incredible era to be alive =) ❤️ 2

Fig. 3 Slack conversation (asynchronous)

- Consumption of digital technology (i.e., individually, kids), setting up new rules in the context of our everyday habits of raising children.
- Understanding digital relationships and the impact of this third space on our relationships—existing and new.
- Common denominators to our digital experience.

Kim's (2001) dichotomy of digital beings defined technology as informative and as executable. Paulus and Lester (2021) bring us forward to today to acknowledge how online spaces have and continue to change human behavior. With modern innovations, current literature, and access we have interpreted and updated technological purposes to analyze our conversations by identifying that digital spaces are designed to:

1. consume-create (e.g., researching, reading, writing, documenting) and/or
2. socialize (e.g., connecting, sharing, planning, organizing).

We present our findings and implications through these two lenses (i.e., separately as consume-create vs. socialize) as conversational vignettes below. However, this was not an easy task. The professional sphere, consume-create tasks, strongly intersected with the private one, socializing. Thus, we accept and acknowledge the continuous hyphens of how our digital third spaces bring us to consume-create-social experiences.

Results: Consume-Create-Social Outcomes from Digital Connections

Our team originally came together for a professional purpose—to conduct an online study on the effect of the pandemic on women and non-binary members of academia. Yet, we gained so much more and here we present our poly-ethnographic data italicized (and key themes bolded) below as ongoing conversations drawn from different platforms (e.g., email, social media). These dialogues present our similar experiences of the hyphens between consume-create and social digital spheres as mothers-academics.

We analyzed how the pandemic impacted our working habits, our work-related behaviors, and how online tools changed our processing and productivity. Reflecting on our discussions, we observed seven, largely overlapping themes, representing not only how our professional and personal lives have been affected by the move to the third space during the pandemic, but also the process of learning and understanding of these impacts. These seven themes are as follows:

- Facing the disruption: challenges of working from home
- Reflecting as academic scholars with mom guilt

- Academic productivity during the pandemic
- The role of digital spaces
- Cooperative learning processes
- Empowered through shared digital safe spaces
- From professional academic collaboration to intercontinental friendships

In the next sections, we unpacked these themes and our findings. In general, we noted that online accessibility to all job tasks had us simultaneously working and performing personal tasks. Working from home blurred the boundaries between home and workplace, parenting and working—creating these third spaces and fluid boundaries, resulting in guilt but also developing new practices to improve productivity. The increasing importance of the digital sphere in our professional lives, while posing challenges, also created opportunities. It allowed us to develop new skills and empowered us as now-globally engaged academics, affecting the ways we conduct research and initiate/participate in other collaborations, in both more efficient and engaged ways. Moreover, through this project we have gained not only collaborators, but also friends. While generalizations are not possible based on our group's singular experience, our work could be taken further by future research exploring the changing nature of research/academic collaborations across a larger sample. In the transcript excerpts below, we add a bold font to these phrases identified as illustrating similar experiences of the members of the team in the context discussed in each paragraph (these have been collectively agreed upon).

Facing the Disruption: Challenges of Working from Home

The first theme of our discussions focused on the *challenges* created by the shift from working and living in largely separated spaces, and at least partially at different times, where the two spaces and activities becoming convoluted:

> Iwona*: Oh, I'm* ***constantly distracted****! I'm* ***working all day****, in the meantime, on the couch, in the bathroom, sitting in a car near a shop, instead of going out shopping! Everything seems to be a little* ***scattered****, all my projects.*
> Agata: *I agree here, I also feel that I am* ***working all the time now****—in the past I would still check my email on my phone in the evening after getting back home, but I tried to not work every evening/weekend. Now I am so used to being*

> *on the computer/phone* ***all day long*** *I find it hard to stop! Just one more email, just 20 more minutes reviewing this paper, just one more search for job opportunities … and when I'm not online/on a computer I am thinking about the work I could be doing.*
> Alpha*: For me it has been a mess. I cannot work at home adequately or consistently. There is always* ***too much going on, too many distractions****, […] I loved going to work at my office at our main campus. Loved going to one of the secluded rooms in the back part of my neighborhood's library. I could take my computer, my materials and work very focused and productively this way. I would put my phone away and just work. Now* ***everything is messed up.*** *I have an office but it is open to the house.* ***I don't have a closed space to hide and work.*** *[…] So, my digital identity during Covid is that of a* ***scattered scholar*** *with a squirrel/monkey brain that is dealing with stress and anxiety with avoidance, therefore, emotional energy is low, cognitive space is low, and this produces more anxiety and here we go, to the graduate student merry-go-round of awfulness we go! Lolz. I need a little cave somewhere […].*

Reflecting as Academic Scholars with Mom Guilt

The second theme represents the reflection on our experience as mothers-academics, which lead to the realization that these fragmentations were common and *guilt* was surmounting. The feeling of guilt about working and not spending time with family, and not-working as much as we were expected to was one of the common denominators of our experience. Spending months at home with our children and partners, we were constantly living in the hyphen—not fully at work, not fully at home:

> Stef*:* ***I've found this feeling of guilt heightened during Covid.*** *For example, multi-tasking work while kids were schooling at home the first spring; or if they are home and I'm locked in the office and they are being ignored (even if they aren't and are occupied with their own stuff).* ***With this feeling I often found it challenging to put 100% into anything I was attempting to do.***
> Iwona*: Oh Stefani,* ***I feel guilty*** *even If they are doing [something] with their father, but especially if they are watching TV with him, instead of doing [something] healthy, going outside. I'm the active, sporty type at home, I don't like when* ***they are watching [TV] all the time****. But I have no right to complain because I'm working, and he is babysitting. Literally sitting.*
> Agata: ***I feel guilty too.*** *About pushing deadlines, about missing opportunities, about not spending enough time with my husband, about not playing enough with kids, about not keeping on top of homeschooling, about not checking up on the family as often as I should be (and friends), about not finding time to look*

> *after myself despite supposedly having more time (e.g., no commuting). I also* ***feel guilty about feeling guilty****. Because we are living through a global pandemic and why am I beating myself up?! My kids are healthy and happy (most of the time), husband is coping too, family and friends love me regardless of how often I call them, and my work is getting done. Be it a bit late sometimes.*
>
> Hala: *I (we) experienced Covid in phases. The first phase was the beginning of lockdown. My daughter was home, the school fully online, and asynchronous. I was teaching synchronous online classes but had to go to the office because I am 50% administrator. Most of the time I came home to find my daughter did none of her school work and thus spent most of our evenings catching up on school. It was tough, and* ***too many tears and frustrations from her side, and guilt from my side****. Then I decided to just forget about school and just do the bare minimum. But then* ***I was feeling guilty and feeling not good enough that I am not focusing on her learning enough.*** *[…] [In the] Fall I had to go back to work. I was given the option to send her to school (…) or go fully online.* ***I felt guilty sending her to school****, while the pandemic was not fully under control. Opted for online. But then* ***I often felt guilty that I am not around enough to help and monitor her learning. Guilty of too much screen time, guilty of not being productive research and work-wise. Like I was not good enough as a mother, but also not good enough as an academic.*** *As Agata said, I also felt guilty about feeling guilty because logically I knew we are in a pandemic, but every night when I put my head on my pillow, I go through all the things I have not done or have not done well. I felt so fragmented and pulled into a million different directions.*
>
> Stef: *Ugh, Hala, that experience of not feeling good enough is painful. Thank you for putting it into words.*

Academic Productivity During COVID-19

Trying to manage this and make meaning, we were attempting to use online tools for work and professional communication—to be productive at all times of the day. The third theme, therefore, can be said to relate to (attempting to improve) *productivity*. As a group we stressed that working together seemed to be more productive; the community we built from behind the screens made us accountable at a time where our physical spaces were no longer shared with colleagues:

> Iwona: ***At the same time everything is somehow moving forward everyday, step by step.*** *I feel more engaged now in my research projects, which has good and bad sides, but for sure is making me feel like a person really devoted to her work.*
>
> Agata: ***All I have to do is show up and do my bit****—the showing up can be replying to a message on Slack, commenting on a draft of the paper we are working*

> *on in real time, as others are editing it—and I can do it* ***flexibly****, putting in an hour or work here, and ten minutes there,* ***from the comfort of my own home****, while managing my other responsibilities.*
> Iwona: *@Agata I have the same strong feeling that being a part of the team working online,* ***everything depends on my effort and motivation, willingness to add what I have****, from my background/discipline. I'm always being listened [to]! For sure, for me it's a "space," this virtual team, where* ***I'm someone a little bit different than at my [university]****.*

The conversation above illustrates how our identity was transformed during our time together—never being alone at home, always accompanied by someone in our physical space and connecting through a digital space, we experienced something different from being academics at universities and from working traditionally by ourselves.

The Role of Pandemic Digital Spaces

Even considering time differences, asynchronous digital tools facilitated our work. This made the process indeed faster and more effective than ever before in our experience. This represents the fourth theme—the *role of digital spaces* in our professional lives, which grew significantly during the pandemic:

> Stef: *I'm sitting in my robe at our dining room table, looking out at snow and editing our proposal. I see Agata is in the doc 5 hours and an ocean away … on Sunday. This truly is something I didn't imagine a year ago, it is cool,* ***a phenomenon, the future of collaboration.*** *Thank you ladies for all you've given to our group and the commitment. It has motivated me beyond our projects and I've enjoyed getting to know you along the way too.*
> Iwona: *I also said yesterday to my hubby that t****ime differences actually let us work in shifts****:) like in a* ***global corporation****. The thing which may be an obstacle may also be an* ***opportunity*** *:)*
> Alpha: *I would have to say our experience with time zones, our* ***learning curve*** *and the implicit awareness when planning our work resulting from this difference in time zones,* ***intersecting*** *with work commitments, individual work, group work, family life, collabs and the whole lot of planets that we have to align in order to be able to coincide and work in these moments in time and space(s). I think this is* ***an intrinsic experience*** *that is purposeful at the same time that delves in the shared liminal space of our collective common denominator and experience.*

Cooperative Learning Processes

We also want to recognize the *learning processes* in this cooperation, as our fifth theme. Although the majority of the team speaks fluent English (as native speakers or long-term residents of English-speaking countries), there was a language barrier in the professional and social context. Iwona teaches and writes in Polish, her native language, at her university. Hala teaches in her native language, Arabic, and English is her second language as well. They both have been using English in scholarly writing and agree that working in a supportive environment of women academics made them feel more comfortable in navigating the language differences with our women-only group. This is one area of growth for the group but there were other areas of new skills and broadening perspectives as discussed below:

> Iwona: *'Does this make sense?'—this is one of the sentences I've learned from this team:) […] According to our discussion today, about me asking "does that make sense?." In the context of the language, the curious thing is that I never ask it when talking in Polish, as I don't want to sound "not sure" about my statements. Among you I wasn't afraid to talk and ask this question.* ***No men in the team, no risk to be perceived 'weak.'***
> Hala: *Being based in Qatar I had limited ability to participate in professional activities that require travel such as conferences. […] With everything being online, I was able to attend conferences, workshops, training, etc.* ***Our collaborative project for example would not have been possible for me without the shift to online.*** *I have not participated in something similar, but I found myself more engaged in online forums and looking for support online more than before.* ***I joined more online groups last year than in the previous 10 years.***
> Stef: ***I appreciate the female perspective and various intersections this group brought together.*** *I can't quite put into words* ***the excitement of working and connecting with a fabulous group of international women academics*** *all living as lifelong learners. I love the new knowledge, diverse perspectives, and camaraderie that has been built over the last year. I feel confident that I could ask questions and gain new insight in a variety of topics (academic and non-academic) from our group.*
> Agata: *I thought that I would have to go to conferences (in-person) and be brave and talk to strangers, trying to persuade them that I have something to bring to the table. Becoming part of the GAP* ***collaboration—where doctoral researchers are equal partners/collaborators with very senior, experienced academics has built my confidence—I really do have a lot to offer!*** *And I didn't have*

> *to try to convince anyone—it was just accepted from the outset! It* ***removed barriers*** *which I feared were going to be so difficult to overcome.*
> Iwona: *When the pandemic came and online talks became somehow natural, I could sit with strangers (you Girls) from all over the world and hide behind the avatar. I could have taken a step back at any time, like it wasn't real, if I felt uncomfortable. I did not—it turned out I shouldn't be afraid or ashamed, because* ***in the online world everyone's profile picture "has the same size"*** *(I mean the feeling of equality I guess) and not everyone speaks English perfectly.*

Empowered Through Shared Digital Safe Spaces

The sixth theme is the *empowerment* we began to feel as mothers-academics in a practical and intellectual sense. As we gained access to a global forum through these digital means, we learned about research in disciplines other than our own, "networked," and began collaborating on joint publications. We began to perceive ourselves as capable, more equal, and competitive with academics from all over the world, influencing other professional collaborations that followed. Things not available before, started to be reachable with one click:

> Iwona: *My first meeting with the whole team was during the summer break. I was visiting my friend with another one with our children, in another city, and* ***I was speaking to you from the playground****.*
> Hala: *I remember that Iwona.*
> Stef: *Me too, I remember loving how committed you were to meet us even when you were out. One time* ***I was editing one of our docs as a passenger on our road trip*** *since we had a deadline, we all were very committed and connected in so many settings.*
> Iwona: *I was terrified. I was not confident about my language, the environment was loud and full of children, I was on a short vacation (so my girlfriends, not working as academics, were looking at me confused about what I was doing). But somehow, I was sure that this is the 'once in a lifetime,' 'one shot.' … This first meeting was a moment, when I realized that* ***everything has changed****. And that 'the gate' has been opened, no matter how pompous it sounds. (…)* ***The regular meetings with the team became one of my few professional and private priorities, because I felt that this time the digital community-building activity would have more real effects than a lot of face to face meetings and conferences I took part in****.*
> Hala: *Being a global citizen though, digital platforms were essential in keeping in touch with people and friends I have met in different stages of my life. But these digital relations remained limited to the personal space, and never related*

to my professional life. And then Covid hit and everything went online. ***With the shift to online, notwithstanding all the challenges associated with it, a new door has opened to me.***

Agata: *Experience with our research collective has definitely influenced [my work]—****I now work with other researchers online and I find it much easier to be assertive and to introduce my ideas****, although those relationships are not as close as ours which I definitely class as a more than mere collaboration with international colleagues […].*

Stef: *I learned about other members' research areas to some degree. This collaboration with women across disciplines and ranks, was new to me. This allowed me a* ***greater understanding of how research is conducted outside of my field.*** *To some degree, participating in Covid GAP also* ***increased my self-efficacy regarding my abilities as a scholar and researcher****. […] This collaboration has also given me new ideas, tools, etc. to share with my students and colleagues.*

Iwona: *I didn't even think that this kind of collaboration was possible in my case. Before the pandemic I used to avoid conferences, as* ***I really don't like to speak up in public, especially in English.*** *As I am from a strange European country, where English is still not lingua franca (I even wrote a paper on this),* ***I always used to perceive myself as being out of the academic world. Shifting to virtual space*** *with my scholarly activities (mainly thanks to this group)* ***has opened my mind and has definitely changed my perception of being an academic. Cooperation*** *with others was always my weakness in research.*

Agata: *Is this to do with the* ***interdisciplinary nature of our group*** *I wonder? I think in general it's harder to set up collaborations with people from other disciplines—because you just don't meet them and you may not consider that you can have shared research interests with people from outside your discipline. It has been so great for our project I feel—that* ***we were all able to bring something from our own expertise and background.*** *So perhaps it is helping us* ***see ourselves differently as 'scholars,'*** *and not necessarily 'scholars of media and communications,' 'languages,' 'neuroscience' or 'education'?*

From Professional Academic Collaboration to Intercontinental Friendships

After a few months of our collaboration, it turned out the professional goals that motivated the origin of our meeting (i.e., GAP) were accompanied by other factors—a need for relations with mothers-academics sharing the same experience, ready and open to use the potential of this new global situation rather than surrender to it. With time, we have built trust and seamlessly started to treat each other as *not only collaborators, but* as *friends* (which is the seventh, and final theme in our dialogues). We shared highs and lows from our professional lives (e.g., one of us graduating after a challenging oral test, another going through a tenure review), but also details about our private lives, including families, health, hobbies, and travels (once this became possible again). We have acknowledged that our relationship with each other is somewhat different from those built with friends we met "live"; however, despite knowing some of us may never meet in-person, we saw our friendship as no less open and worthwhile. As Stef once said, "*[W]e all intrinsically need relationships and by connecting digitally we are not avoiding the future but embracing our reality.*" Unlike our previous experiences of largely "lurking" in online forums and groups for academic women/mothers, through regular, direct interaction, both synchronous and asynchronous, in closed "safe" spaces, we were able to form a real bond. We became open to using different online channels to communicate effectively with the team. Thus continuing to support the hyphen of consume-create-social evidence of digital settings:

> Agata: *Without having to cover expenses to go to meetings, without having to travel across the country or to another continent and having to find childcare—along the way—**I feel I've also made new friends**. A lot of my friendships are online—as I live away from my home country—so this is not new. Using digital platforms, messaging boards, etc. **made me quickly feel like I know my collaborators**. More so than if we've met at a conference and communicated occasionally via email.*
> Stef: *Digital relationships sound in-authentic to me. The idea seems so disconnected in our intersecting worlds yet they are so powerful. **I have more surface level interactions in a digital space than with humans in person, on most work days.** I think Covid brought a new setting for deeper connections and tools (e.g., Zoom, Slack) to build these relationships. […] As an educator, I am well-versed in the power of relationships and community building. It takes effort on all ends to build community and relationships which then improve the experience and outcomes of collaborative projects. **I think the relationships built in this group would not have been successful without the common experience of the pandemic and the extra time we all had—thus allowing us to meet across the world in synchronous meetings to allow the relationships to blossom.** Over this time we got to know each other via these meetings and through other digital platforms while we worked toward a common goal.*
> Agata: *I see our group as a **support group as well** and feel that I **would love to maintain our contact online**—and perhaps in the future in person—going forward. […] **I think about you as friends**. […] I found that since Covid my relationships (or at least how I feel about them) with newly met people are different. Because in the past I would only use Skype/Facetime to talk to people I know already and have friendly relationships with (mostly family and close*

*friends), I am adapting a similar manner to newly met people—**friendly, more casual, engaging in small talk** about their personal circumstances, homes, animals, children etc. […] I also definitely engage more with strangers who I now perceive more as my (different but just as real) community—on a couple of social media sites, where I now comment, ask questions and engage in private messaging with (women) scholars—whereas in the past I would mostly just observe, read the comments of others.*

Hala: *My experience with digital friendships can be dated back to the early 2000s when I moved to the US from Sudan. Being young and lonely with limited language skills, I found refuge in Sudanese online forums as a way to connect to my homeland. I have developed great relationships with people I never met in person, but we share a common language and culture. However, once I adjusted and acclimatized to my "new homeland," my reliance on finding support online faded (especially when I started grad school and time became a rare commodity). […] As Agata said, **I consider our subgroup more of a friend group than a mere scholarly collaborative.** I would not say the same about my other online engagement, but I am more engaged in conversations online than before Covid.*

Iwona: *And my digital image was always 'rich' and 'actual,' I was using it sometimes as a replacement for the face to face contacts with a lot of people I didn't have time for due to, well, too much of everything. The thing I was thinking about was **when is the right time to add you on Facebook?** And what do we think about each other 'online'? Because I think that your online images are so coherent with the persons I know from the meetings and cooperation:) […] I hope we will be able to meet one day:). Ok, I'm done:) @Hala Guta you can revise everything again in the morning:)*

Alpha: *Jajaja love it, so on brand with us. @Iwona Leonowicz-Bukała nicely put:)*

Hala: I did some editing this morning (Doha time) so over to you Stefani. […] Last week I had a dream that I visited Iwona and Agata in Poland (I don't know why Agata was in Poland in my dreams). Then I woke up thinking I would share this and extend an invitation to you all to visit Qatar one day (while I am still here). Now Iwona has brought up visiting, here is my official invitation to you all once travel is allowed.

Stef: *Love all the posts here, thank you @Iwona Leonowicz-Bukała for your honesty. @Hala Guta I would love to come to Qatar one day! I love traveling and cannot wait to go explore new places in the future.*

Agata: *Thank you Hala! I'd love to visit you too! And we could all definitely meet in Poland as the cheapest place for us all to visit for a holiday (besides the flights of course to get there!)^_^.*

Iwona: *I personally prefer Qatar:):):) But all are welcome to Poland:)*

> Alpha: *Omg! Yesterday I was about to post that we should all come to travel, explore, do some work together of course—and just visit here in Mèrida!! Such wonderful places in my beloved Mexico. Also, I'm down for Poland and Qatar, let's make it happen!! Covid-permitting but of course:)*

Now, writing these words, we are still working on our common projects with the larger Covid GAP collective while simultaneously adhering to our regular professional assignments. We continue to see the need and effectiveness of digital spaces for consumption-creation-socialization (see Fig. 3), all the while standing firm in our production and voice as mothers-academics.

CONCLUSIONS: NEW NORMAL TO NEW PARADIGMS

We were lucky to find each other and ignite energy to initiate a collaborative effort of virtual sense-making. This new reality built a friendship and connection where we all felt accepted and empowered to contribute to science and academia in our various hyphens. Co-writing this chapter was unexpectedly more social for us than anything else within the larger international project—our children and pets appeared in our Zoom meetings more times than we could count. In a world of performance-based evaluation in academia, our time spent together discussing our relations gave us a more in-depth understanding of why we are here together in this third space and how we have stretched our epistemologies as mothers-academics.

We sought to reflect on and understand how the hyphens of our digital selves and virtual spaces morphed our identities as women, mothers, and academics during the pandemic. Acknowledging this new paradigm, one where everything is still up in flames in the world outside, we are expected to function as "normal" as before. Oftentimes in our meetings, we had conversations about the ways we navigated our respective lives in a prescribed calm yet, the pandemic is still far from being over. In fact, while writing this chapter in the fall of 2021, two of our households were directly impacted by COVID-19. In uncertain times, this new paradigm frames reality by reinforcing a collective understanding that posits a resigned look on the prevalent state of affairs while at the same time contributing to the narrative that the world and our emotions should be settled by now. We simultaneously recognize the existence of this collective state of mind while at the same time challenge this notion by reflecting and recognizing that not only is it ok to "feel uncomfortable with our present condition because the 'new normal' describes a reality to which many do not have access" (Asonye, 2020), but also to actively allow for a co-constructed space to reflect, refresh, and recharge our cognitive and emotional energy to gather our barefoot selves. We do not know what the next years will bring, what we do know is we have formed a strong bond to hold us accountable going forward. We know now that we can continue and succeed in our independent and group oriented-journeys (hyphenated and alone), utilizing the digital space to carry on; we will thrive and ascribe to continue to be productive, moving forward as confident barefoot, *descalzas*, *boso*, *hafiyat*, mothers-academics.

Post-script: The private Facebook group managed by Cathy Mazak *I Should Be Writing* was archived on December 21, 2021. There were almost 16,000 women and non-binary followers in this academic writing group. We appreciate the initial space and facilitation provided by this group that lead us to each other.

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Creating an Online Community of Support: Mothers of Children with Disabilities Working in the Academy

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Gendered inequities in academic careers due to parenting responsibilities are well documented (e.g., Mikel, 2018; Antecol et al., 2018), with clear calls to action on how to best ensure gender equity (Cardel et al., 2020; Malisch et al., 2020). Yet, the majority of proposals contain implicit assumptions of parenting "typically developing" children, that is, children

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who meet developmental milestones within biomedical expectations. These children need only occasional doctors' appointments, move along a predictable trajectory of increased independence and self-sufficiency, and require bounded periods of intense caregiving (e.g., infancy, adolescence). In contrast, having a child with a disability diagnosis correlates with more frequent, less predictable, and potentially indefinite periods of intense caregiving.

As academics, whether on the tenure track, as teaching faculty, or as contingent professors, our career trajectories are often self-organized, largely without formal mentorship, to meet goals for promotion that are uniquely intense and demanding, and so on, given inequitable labor markets within higher education. This dual exceptionalism—as academics *and* as mothers of children with disabilities—reinforces the risk of isolation already endemic to these roles. Stretched as we are among our roles as scholar, teacher, mentor, parent, caregiver, advocate, and partner (Good et al., 2017), we have been forced to reevaluate and often redefine professional and parenting "success." In this chapter, we describe a particular source of group peer support that has become essential to our emotional wellbeing, advocacy for our children, and our career resilience: a private Facebook group exclusively for academic mothers[1] of children with disabilities. Through this online group we exchange moral and material support—for example, from encouragement to recommended strategies for navigating Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings—using our scholarly training and professional skills to address the complex duality of parenting children with disabilities and building a scholarly career. We highlight the benefits and challenges of this online community and suggest takeaways for effective group peer support for academic mothers.

[1] Mothers is defined broadly to include trans women and adoptive mothers.

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Disability diagnoses may occur at any stage in our children's lives, beginning in the perinatal period. Because disabilities may be genetic, developmental, or due to exogenous factors, parents of children with disabilities may lack typical support groups often available to new parent cohorts and/or find themselves unexpectedly seeking support groups at other periods in their lives. To compound this challenge, academics frequently take jobs that are far from family and support networks, and thus may be more reliant upon online affinity groups for peer support when needed. Statistically, we are often one of few faculty at our institutions parenting a disabled child, and/or navigating particular disabilities. This amplifies our desire for support from peers who understand the intersectional aspects of our academic and parenting roles.

Benefits

Informal support has been shown to be more effective at alleviating stress than formal support (e.g., Bailey et al., 1992; Boyd, 2002; Resch et al., 2010). Group member composition and cohesion—that is, the degree to which members identify with one another—are significant factors for successful disability-related support groups (Hammarberg et al., 2014). Positive adaptation to our own, often unexpected, journeys increases when we have peers who empathize with our experiences (Jessop et al., 1988). In contrast to our experiences with other support groups (whether face-to-face, virtual, diagnosis-based, neighborhood-based, etc.), a primary strength of this group is in providing a space where we feel understood explicitly for that which typically "others" us at work *and* in our communities. We feel seen and heard through interactions including sharing strategies and resources for navigating the complexities of raising children with disabilities, as well as offering solidarity and sympathy when the indignities of gender inequity and ableist stigma confront us in our daily lives. We place a high value on finding evidence-based approaches to support our children. Informally, our online group resembles an advocacy coalition, as we learn and disseminate effective efforts to obtain the best possible medical care and education for our children and equitable workplace policies for caregivers (Schneider et al., 2021). Through these collective efforts, we build community and in the process become empowered advocates for our children and in our careers. Sharing resources increases the likelihood of successfully managing practical aspects of achieving work-life fit. Because this advocacy may be a lifelong commitment, our online group is also an essential site of respite and restoration when we experience setbacks at work or in supporting our children's educational and medical needs.

For example, one skill-building resource members often share is boundary-setting. The educational, healthcare, and independent living needs of our children are by orders of degree more intense than typically developing children. Thus, learning to delineate our time for research, teaching, and parenting—particularly for tenure track and contingent faculty—is often crucial for our productivity. However, we do this up against pervasive negative stereotypes of academic mothers and, in particular, of academic parents of children with disabilities, which suggest we are less committed to our work (Williams, 2005). Therefore, we also assist one another in psychological boundary-setting, that is, compartmentalization, learning to manage external and internal expectations so anxiety and stigma do not derail us.

Like most affinity groups, ours has developed a distinct culture, what Gee (1989) calls a "discourse community." For example, the group description and discussions reveal a value system centered on disability rights that takes a clear stance against ableism even as it acknowledges varying levels of comfort among members with the language of disability. The group is designed to encourage intentional, reflective use of language—such as our adoption of language by disability rights activists, not only because our interactions and much of our professional advancement (i.e., publications) depend upon written language, but also because members (some of whom are themselves disabled) and our children deserve the avoidance of discriminatory language. This in turn supports group cohesion and positive identity development for members: the group's explicit belief that "disability is not a dirty word" (Andrews et al., 2019) empowers members to develop identities that incorporate a disability rights lens, despite the stigma we may face at work or in our daily lives.

Challenges/Opportunities

The benefits of our group are not equitably distributed. As academic mothers, we reflect the demographics of our profession: group members are predominantly white, heteronormative, cisgendered, and neurotypical. Few members self-identify as disabled, and some that do leave after the undue burden of educating non-disabled members and “calling in” ableist members becomes too much. There is also a gap between new members whose disabled children often have just been diagnosed versus long-time members who may be further along in their parenting journey and as disability advocates. Onboarding new members is challenging as they are often new to their child’s specific diagnosis and support needs *and* to the public discourse on disability, including its history and politics. New members often need immediate emotional and practical support, but they are also expected to adjust quickly to the group’s disability rights values system. This requires a complex set of social skills that apply specifically to online groups such as ours (Ziegler et al., 2014).

Finally, managing group size to maintain intimacy and solidarity for group cohesion is a persistent problem, especially in the past few years as we surpassed 550 members and word-of-mouth recommendations accelerated. Growth offers invaluable diversity of viewpoints and knowledge, but also reduces interpersonal connections and trust essential to being vulnerable with one another. This is a perennial tension, balancing access for academic mothers seeking our unique peer support with maintaining group cohesion for offering high quality support. Smaller spinoff communities that are often organized around specific disabilities or longevity in the group is one solution that seems to be working to maintain a sense of community and trust for members. However, these smaller groups, especially those that are cohorts of long-time members, may reinforce homogeneity as members self-select into them.

Our private online Facebook community for academic mothers of children with disabilities has offered substantial career and parenting support while also reproducing inequities typical to academia and leaving unresolved the homophily conundrum (McPherson et al., 2001). While academics often define success as intellectual vitality, measured in quantity and quality of external output (“publish or perish”), academic parents of children with disabilities often have different definitions of success (Schneider et al., 2021). Membership in this online community has offered solidarity and affirmation for our revised definitions of success, as well as pathways to realizing them in a profession that is not designed to accommodate caregivers or disabled people. In this way, our online community mitigates the potential gap between conventional academic measures of success and our revised assessments, reducing both maternal stress *and* professional pressure as we pursue work-life fit.

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Who Is There When Everything Changes?: The Anchoring Effect of Online Maternal Support Groups During Periods of Liminal Professional Identity

Emily Rosado-Solomon, Elisheva Cohen, Traci-Ann Wint, and Caitlin Vaughn Carlos

INTRODUCTION

There are few periods in a career that are as challenging as the beginning. In academia, the beginning of one's career is marked by rigorous education in the form of a Ph.D. program or other advanced degree. During such programs, students are exposed to a vast body of research in their

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discipline then slowly amass knowledge in a specific niche area. At the end of the program, they are expected to quickly transition from the role of a student to the role of an "expert," with enough knowledge and skill to establish their own lab, craft their own research agenda, develop their own courses, and otherwise succeed in academia without the support and guidance of their advisor (Deegan & Hill, 1991; Keefer, 2015).

Beginning a professional career can be especially difficult because it involves the temporary embodiment of a liminal identity (Pratt et al., 2006), where one is in between an established identity that they are leaving behind and a new identity that they have not fully developed (Turner, 1974, Ashforth, 2000; Ebaugh, 1988). Such periods are fraught as individuals must figure out how to combine the remnants of their previous identity (e.g., doctoral candidate) with their new emerging identity (e.g., professor) to form a coherent self-concept while maintaining productivity in their employment (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Moreover, individuals must simultaneously adapt their own sense of self *and* navigate changes in how they interact with—and are perceived by—people both within and outside their workplace (Beech, 2011; George et al., 2021). These changes in identity and interpersonal relationships are also frequently accompanied by lifestyle changes, such as moving out of state for a new job, that can further destabilize an individual's sense of place.

A similarly common and impactful transition is that of becoming a mother (whether for the first time or not), as it involves "the definition, creation, and integration of new roles and relationships" (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988, p. 63). It encompasses changes in the way women see themselves and the way that they are seen by others (Freeney et al., 2021; Ladge et al., 2012), as new mothers grapple with the nuances of integrating their maternal identity with remnants of their existing identities (wife, daughter, friend, employee, etc.; Little & Masterson, 2021). When periods of professional liminality—such as transitioning from doctoral student to professional academic—overlap with a period of personal change, such as becoming a mother or expanding one's family, the compounded transitions can feel overwhelming.

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The chapter investigates the role of online communities in mitigating the challenges associated with these overlapping transitions, which we refer to as *dual liminality*, to describe simultaneous transition in multiple life domains (Marshall et al., 2019). To accomplish this, we weave together our personal experiences participating in a Facebook group for academic women with babies born in the same year (henceforth, "The Group"). All four authors of this chapter are members of The Group who gave birth during our graduate studies. For two of us (Emily and Elisheva), this was our first child and marked a transition to motherhood, and for the other two (Caitlin and Traci), it was our second child and marked an expansion of our family. While working through the challenges of motherhood, we were also navigating the world of academia and preparing for an eventual transition from student to scholar, from a position of academic training to one of academic expertise.

The Group was critical in anchoring our sense of self during periods of transition, as we needed support and camaraderie to navigate a complex set of changes. For example, a seldom discussed—but not uncommon—element of having a baby involves the unwanted production of bodily fluids (e.g., leaking breast milk, peeing involuntarily due to poor pelvic control; Van Amsterdam, 2015; Van Brummen et al., 2006). This can be isolating, especially when accompanied by the experience of other taboo physical and emotional changes, and thus the presence of a like-minded community of women was essential to our ability to persevere through symptoms during transition. One author of this chapter was particularly relieved when she found out from The Group that other new mothers, who were successful professors and well-respected in their field, also peed in their pants at work.

In the remainder of the chapter, we draw on extant literature on transitions (e.g., Ashforth, 2000; Ebaugh, 1988), the role of relationships in such transitions (e.g., George et al., 2021; Pratt et al., 2006), and internet support communities (Barak et al., 2008; Eysenbach et al., 2004) to explain how online support groups can be an important relational anchor during a period of multiple transitions. In so doing, we describe how our personal experiences were impacted by particular features of The Group that were critical to our success in navigating a period of dual liminality. We conclude this chapter with a description of themes that scholars, organizations, and women themselves might draw on to better understand the value of social media groups during periods of compounded transitions.

Literature Review

Identity and Role Transitions

Role transitions refer to a person's adoption of a new role and/or dismissal of an old role, either in the workplace (e.g., moving departments, being promoted) or outside of the workplace (e.g., having a child, going through divorce, or moving to a new community; Ashforth, 2000; Ebaugh, 1988). These transitions can be disruptive because people's identities are often based, in part, on a particular role that they occupy (Ashforth, 2000), or an affiliation associated with that role, such as their role as an employee of a specific organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). As a result, transitions necessarily involve a reshuffling of people's identities, or a change in the way people see themselves and define their existence in relation to their surroundings (Methot et al., 2018). While these transitions can ultimately result in a positive new state, the process of transitioning is complex and often stressful (George et al., 2021). One reason for this complexity is that employees in transition have a liminal identity, in which their identity is "betwixt and between" two or more established identities (Garsten, 1999; Turner, 1974). Liminal identities are characterized by periods of fluctuation and uncertainty, and can therefore disrupt multiple aspects of a person's life as they navigate changes associated with their role transition.

In addition to the identity changes inherent in role transitions, there are potentially behavioral, physical, and relational shifts that exacerbate feelings of instability in times of change (George et al., 2021). For instance, when a student transitions to a professional, they must switch their behavior from the role of a learner who takes direction to that of an "expert" who gives direction and advises others (Pratt et al., 2006). In professional transitions there are often relational changes, such as distancing from an established support system and getting to know a new set of relational partners (Kleinbaum, 2012). Additionally, peers and colleagues may come to view a person differently as they transition from one role to another (Beech, 2011; DeRue & Ashford, 2010), thereby changing the nature of existing relationships. All these changes may exacerbate an individual's feelings of instability and ultimately cause a sense of alienation (Pierce, 2007). To further complicate the transition process, these elements of role transitions may not be temporally aligned (Rouse, 2016). Continuing the previous example, an emerging professional may distance themselves from their student identity before they formally finish their training in anticipation of becoming an "expert," or they may still feel like a student even after they have formally finished their schooling.

Internet Support Groups

With respect to internet communities, research generally finds that such groups can provide much needed support (Eysenbach et al., 2004). These support groups are especially beneficial for persons with rare or stigmatized attributes, such as those who are ill (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Mo & Coulson, 2010), provide care for sick relatives (Klemm & Wheeler, 2005), or have other attributes that make it difficult for them to find understanding supporters in their social circle or local area. Support in these groups can be emotional and include validation, empathy, and a space to share personal experiences, or instrumental, in which members help one another navigate logistical challenges associated with their shared circumstance (Eichhorn, 2008; Griffiths et al., 2009). Moreover, online support groups are unique because they allow for democratization—anybody can post or respond, which is particularly empowering for people with less voice in other life domains (Hall & Irvine, 2008). Additionally, the format allows for vulnerability in an otherwise disconnected group of people that may be riskier in a professional setting (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008).

Online social support groups are particularly beneficial to new mothers, or mothers expanding their family, as they undergo relational, identity, and bodily changes while caring for another human (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Hall & Irvine, 2008). Support for these new mothers is crucial because pregnancy and early motherhood represent a salient period of liminality in which women experience physical and emotional changes that may fundamentally alter their identity (Ladge et al., 2012). Given the consequence of these changes, women benefit from internet communities that provide encouragement and support for intimate topics, especially when they may not have analogously supportive relationships in their extant social circle (Johnson, 2015). This is particularly true when mothers need to share negative sentiments about parenting (e.g., frustration, confusion, or sadness), which are often taboo in wider social discourse (César et al., 2018). As all four authors have experienced, such groups can become a lifeline during the transition to motherhood and for years thereafter.

Context and Methods

Methods

"The personal is political" has long been the rallying cry of feminist activists and scholars (Hanisch, 2000; hooks, 2016). The process of researching and writing the chapter was one that examined the effect and impact of public facing yet contained intimacy. We sought to not only highlight the ways our personal experiences as mothers have been shaped by the political context of the academy as a male-dominated space in a patriarchal society, but also analyze the ways that we and others built a community that recognized the political nature of our daily experiences and sought to fill the gaps and ease the transitions. As we engaged social media and group change analysis in our research, we necessarily leaned heavily into autoethnography. Anthropologist Irma McClaurin defines autoethnography as a form that enables the writer to "assemble a portrait that is a combination of personal memories (autobiographical) and general cultural descriptions (ethnography)" (McClaurin, 2001, p. 66). We individually revisited, re-read, and reflected upon our own posts in the group; mined the social media platform's data about ourselves and our engagement; and connected synchronously in Zoom sessions to discuss our shared history with the group in community with one another. Systematically, critically, and reflexively examining our own experiences we theorize through a decidedly feminist epistemology and analyze processes of transition and liminality as based in our own and others' lived realities.

About the Group

The Group is a private, online Facebook group with nearly 550 members, though there is a core group of around 100 members who interact more regularly on the platform, and another 100–200 members who view and read posts regularly without commenting. All members of The Group identify as both academics and mothers to babies born in a particular year (henceforth "year X"), and The Group accepts a broad definition of each concept. There are group members who hold faculty positions at a range of universities (research-intensive institutions, small liberal arts colleges, teaching focused institutions, etc.) and members in research positions at various institutions; there are group members with Ph.D.s who work outside of higher education and other members who are currently pursuing their Ph.D.s. Similarly, there are group members for whom their year X baby was their first and others for whom their year X baby was a second or third child. There are group members who have since had additional children and others for whom their year X baby is their youngest or only child.

Engagement in The Group is quite lively and there can be upwards of 15 original posts a day. Each post may generate as few as 3 comments or as many as 100 comments (and sometimes more!), plus a range of Facebook reactions (likes, etc.). Group members engage with The Group in different ways with some who frequently initiate posts, others who primarily respond to posts by others, and those who are considered "frequent lurkers," meaning they read what is posted and follow the threads, but rarely comment.

Content of posts in The Group vary, though often there is a connection to either mothering or academia. For example, members may ask questions about particular situations they are facing at work or challenges they are experiencing with their year X child. Members may post vents about difficult behaviors from their children, their colleagues, their spouses, or other family members. Members also turn to each other for advice on professional tasks such as writing cover letters and interviewing for jobs, responding to reviewers, navigating university hierarchies, and so forth. We also post about our successes in both parenting and work; share resources such as toys, shows, or movies that are a hit with our children; and post "growing baby threads" where we share pictures and highlight the wonderful things our year X child is doing. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as many people were physically isolated from their support systems, we turned to each other to collectively navigate decisions (such as should I send my child back to school? should I allow my parents to come visit?), share resources and articles about vaccine development, and serve as a collective source of support for each other.

Relationships in The Group also extend beyond the boundaries of Facebook. Group members living in the same city may meet occasionally for playdates or childfree outings and may get together when one group member travels to a town or city where others live. Group members have collaborated on academic endeavors including publications and speaking invitations. We have pooled financial resources to support members in need by sending gifts when facing hard times, gift cards for meals when ill, and sometimes cash when needed.

About the Authors (Emily, Caitlin, Traci, and Elisheva)

We, the authors of this chapter, each come to The Group with different backgrounds. We each joined The Group as a graduate student and, since our year X babies were born, have transitioned to different professional positions. For two of us, Elisheva and Emily, our year X babies were our first children and for two of us, Caitlin and Traci, our year X babies were second children. Additionally, we have each followed different professional trajectories since graduate school. Emily transitioned from graduate school directly into a tenure-track faculty position while Traci transitioned from graduate school to a lectureship before transitioning to a tenure-track position. Caitlin worked as a Visiting Assistant Professor (VAP) and founded a small family business while simultaneously completing her Ph.D., which she obtained last year. Elisheva was a doctoral candidate when her daughter was born and transitioned to a position as a postdoctoral fellow after graduation. For Emily, Traci, and Elisheva, these professional changes were accompanied by moves to other regions of the country.

We also each participate in The Group differently. Elisheva is a very frequent poster and commenter (multiple posts/comments a week) while Caitlin is a less frequent poster and commenter, with two to three original posts a month, as well as several comments. Traci posts less frequently, with occasional original posts and comments, and Emily is a frequent lurker and rare poster. For ease of reference, we summarize our experiences and engagement in Table 1.

Table 1 Our experiences and engagement in The Group

Name	*Professional transitions*	*Number of kids*	*Posting habits*
Emily	From graduate school to tenure-track faculty position	1	Frequent lurker
Caitlin	Visiting Assistant Professor and business owner *while* in graduate school, and continued VAP and business after completing her Ph.D.	2	Frequent poster
Traci	From grad school to lecturer (2 years) to tenure-track faculty position	2	Moderate poster
Elisheva	From graduate school to postdoctoral fellow	1	Very frequent poster

Data and Findings

Because we all had different personal contexts when we joined The Group, we had corresponding differences in the ways we sought support from The Group during our simultaneous personal and professional transitions. Some of us initially turned to The Group for support in the professional element of our dual liminality, whereas others needed more guidance with the maternal transition. Throughout our time in The Group, we were also able to give guidance and validation to others in personal and professional domains. The give-and-take of support between us and others in The Group positioned us as both novice and expert, and contributed to our comfort level in The Group and in our ongoing navigation of personal and professional identity. In the paragraphs that follow we present each of our stories and perspectives on the ways that The Group supported us following the birth of our year X child, simultaneously reporting our experiences and highlighting the ways that The Group helped us navigate various aspects of our liminal identities.

Emily's Story

I (Emily) joined The Group in June of year X immediately after my son was born. I was excited to join The Group so I could receive support and role modeling of what a working academic mother does—or should do. At the time, my entire identity was wrapped up in my professional pursuits, and I was not sure how to integrate that with a new maternal identity. Indeed, I was so loathe to deprioritize my academic identity that I declined the semester of maternity leave that was offered (and strongly recommended) by my department, and I sent work emails from the hospital after my son's birth with notes of apology that my correspondence would be "slightly delayed because I just had a baby." In response to one of these emails, a colleague suggested I join a Facebook group for academic mothers. That group soon led me to find The Group, which was more intimate and relevant than the broader group to which I had initially been referred.

While I desperately wanted to have a child, I experienced ambivalence about caring for a newborn as someone who is not naturally maternal, while simultaneously trying to nurture the academic identity that was core to my sense of self. I was immediately comforted by joining The Group to find that others shared the same ambivalence about elements of transitioning to motherhood. Because I was still overwhelmed by grappling with my transition while trying to keep everything afloat, I found The Group particularly helpful because I could benefit from support without having to seek help by articulating my needs. Indeed, it would be years before I could articulate all the emotions I felt during my son's infancy, so the ability to benefit from support without having to discuss my challenges was critically important for me.

Although I did not comment often, I felt a sense of camaraderie as a part of this community that exposed the uncomfortable and frustrating moments of mothering alongside the joys and triumphs. I related especially to discussions about breastfeeding difficulty and sleep deprivation, which were not openly talked about by others in my social circle but were salient parts of my daily experience. Given my social context, The Group played an important role in reassuring me that I was not alone in the challenges I faced. As an example, a week before my son's first birthday, I posted the following:

> *Mostly looking for solidarity, and I need to vent for 30 seconds (and sorry in advance if this comes off as whining). This morning I was so sleep deprived that I fell asleep while reading emails and drinking coffee in bed, and woke up to the very full cup of coffee pouring ALL OVER my comforter and sheets. Mamas who have done this before—when does the sleep deprivation stop?*

Several mothers reassured me that this was common, with some sharing that they had to wait years until their sleep deprivation fully subsided. My son would not sleep through the night until after his second birthday, but I felt better knowing that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

Elisheva's Story

When I (Elisheva) joined The Group, I was a first-time mom of a newborn and a Ph.D. candidate with a laptop full of dissertation data. I was fortunate to have no academic responsibilities during the semester following my daughter's birth and the privilege of being a full-time mom. During that period, The Group offered support as I navigated the challenges of breastfeeding a child with a tongue tie, getting the baby to sleep, and responding to different cries, colds, and other complications. As a community of new moms, I was also able to help other women in The Group by answering their questions and offering words of encouragement. Even though I was "just a graduate student" and others were advanced faculty on the tenure track, I was able to connect with, be vulnerable with, and provide support to women across the academic hierarchy as we were all connected in our role as mothers.

When I returned to a full-time schedule of teaching, working, and dissertating the following fall, and then when I began a postdoctoral fellowship the year after that, The Group became a space to receive advice on a wide range of academic-related issues. For example, almost a year after my daughter was born I posted the following: "*I just had an article rejected. It sucks. Encouragement/reassurance welcome!*" In response, I received 16 comments from other academics expressing solidarity, advice on how to proceed, and words of encouragement reminding me that this happens to everyone. I also used this space to navigate the intersection of motherhood and academia. For example, prior to attending a conference I posted a question about pumping, prefacing it by saying "*Next week will be my first time traveling without Ava as a non-pumping-but-still-breastfeeding mom.*" The Group had shifted to a space where I could receive advice not only about parenting, but also about academic life.

In addition to providing valuable guidance that facilitated my transition from student to scholar, participation in The Group provided me opportunities to experiment with and build my identity as a scholar in two important ways. First, The Group provided a valuable window into the daily trials, tribulations, and celebrations of academic life and the intersection of academia and mothering. This demystified the life of an academic mother and helped me understand that academic women were regular people, just like me. Seeing that they also had questions about teaching, vents about article rejections, and experiences of sexism validated my own experiences. Sharing their celebrations of receiving awards, obtaining tenure, and publishing manuscripts taught me to celebrate my own academic achievements. Recognizing that these challenges and successes came alongside questions about curious child behavior (e.g., why is my toddler obsessed with my snot?), vents about difficult child behaviors (e.g., what are strategies you use to redirect toddler tantrums?), and celebrations of wonderful child behaviors (e.g., check out this amazing drawing my child did) continuously reminded me that they were no different than me.

As my sense of belonging within The Group solidified, I grew more comfortable responding to posts about academic life, thereby experimenting with, and simultaneously reinforcing, my identity as a scholar and academic. For example, when someone posted a question about how to manage their personal and professional email addresses, I was comfortable offering the following advice: "*I have them merged on my iphone but separated when I check on my computer. … I like that when I'm checking email on the go, I can just see everything, but when I am sitting down for my email hour, I can just focus on work emails.*" While this may seem like a mundane post, it is noteworthy for a few reasons. First, that I felt confident to provide advice on managing emails to someone more senior than me shows the valuable dynamics of The Group and how it built my scholarly identity. Second, the reference to "my email hour," a common practice among academics, demonstrates how I experimented with and adapted academic norms. Finally, the pair of responses to my comment from other faculty saying "this is my approach, too" reinforced and validated my identity as a scholar.

Caitlin's Story

When I joined The Group in year X, I was pregnant with my second child. My first had been born at an extremely challenging time in my academic/graduate career, as I was leaving one Ph.D. program in order to complete the degree at a different institution. I held a lot of self-doubt at this time about whether I belonged in academia, and the stress that comes with motherhood inevitably heightened my anxiety. When my second child was born, I was back in graduate school and things were going fairly well. Still, I felt alone in my identity as a graduate student mother, without any peers who were in the same life situation. In both doctoral programs, I was the only mothering student with young children.

My transition into the second Ph.D. program also coincided with my work as an adjunct faculty member at a small private university in the area. In this position, I navigated the liminal space between my graduate student identity and my identity as a professional faculty member. I held the responsibilities of designing and teaching my own courses, serving on general education study projects, and even being a mentor for a senior capstone project. Four years into my doctoral program, this space of liminal professional identity was further complicated as I took a position at a different university as a full-time Visiting Assistant Professor (VAP), while still working on my dissertation. Navigating my role as a full-time VAP—a professional "expert"—while simultaneously maintaining my position as a doctoral student—a "novice"—often evoked a sense of confusion and even fraud within myself.

On top of the juxtaposition of being both faculty and student (albeit at different institutions), I also didn't quite fit in with the parents around me. My husband was a postdoctoral scholar, and our job stability was more precarious. Even in our 30s, we were (for our community) often the youngest parents in the room. In my day-to-day life, I felt like I lived in the "in-between"—I was everything (faculty member, graduate student, parent) and yet not quite the same as my peers in any of these spaces.

The Group helped me navigate these multiple identities of faculty member, student, and mother. This online space where I did not immediately know someone's rank or academic status lessened, or removed, many of the hierarchical barriers that exist in the academy and allowed us to communicate with each other as equals. Of course, I had much to learn from the higher-ranked faculty in The Group regarding my academic development, but as a second-time mother, I also had something to offer. It didn't matter that I was a graduate student; when it came to conversations regarding our children, I was considered "experienced." Being able to give advice about mothering to women who were hierarchically above me in the academy helped to complicate the lines of personal and professional identity, and showed me that, at the end of the day, we are whole people with complex experiences. My simultaneous "expert" and "novice" positions helped me to understand, and grow comfortable in, the gray zone of personal and professional identity. We often think of academic progressions in terms of fixed milestones (graduation, post-doc, VAP, tenure-track position, tenure, etc.), but the ability to share our diverse experiences in academia within The Group helped me appreciate the reality that some of these milestones may happen in different orders or overlap with one another.

Finally, our posts became more complicated and personal as we began to know each other's life stories and experiences. As time progressed we even began to move into more intimate spaces (e.g., Zoom conversations, regional meet-ups). For me, posts in The Group and our live Zoom conversations helped my confidence grow and enabled me to embrace the intersections of all three of my core identities—student, faculty, and mother—and realize that I didn't have to choose. Whatever our academic positions were (graduate student, adjunct, tenure track, tenured, and eventually including those who moved away from academic careers), we were united by the shared experience of parenting young children in a complicated world.

Traci's Story

I was halfway through pregnancy with my second child when I stumbled into The Group. It wasn't my first foray into the world of online moms' groups—while pregnant with my first I had joined my *birth club* community board on a popular online media site—but this was my first experience with such a small, niche group. Despite the lack of anonymity that is offered by larger boards, the members of The Group were refreshingly frank. Among my first engagements with The Group was a post about vaginal births after cesarean section. The responses to the original poster's question ranged from anecdotes and personal experiences, to follow-up questions, and peer-reviewed data AND analysis. It didn't take long for me to realize that I had found my people. I was a graduate student living far away from family and struggling to write a dissertation while dealing with third trimester nausea, a toddler, and the prospect of juggling a teaching assistantship and a newborn, and I was determined to finish my (at the time, barely started) dissertation before the birth of the baby—a goal that was idealistic at best. The Group offered space for commiseration around the corporeality of pregnancy, the chaos of early parenthood, and the intellectual and practical concerns that characterize several different stages of academic life. I asked questions about vaccines, and childcare, and what to wear home from the hospital; about headaches, and breast pumps, diaper rash, toddler tantrums, student emails, course evaluations, and grading; and my queries were consistently met with grace, commiseration, and data.

The Group's existence within a social media platform where members most often self-identify with markers unrelated to work led to the creation of a democratized space. The absence of the usual markers of academic hierarchy allowed me the ability to exercise something graduate school imposter syndrome often denied—expertise. Within The Group my status as an experienced mother held value. When one mom reached out to The Group exhausted and distressed that her baby was refusing to sleep anywhere but on her or her partner, I was able to join the chorus of moms commiserating and giving advice even though my year X baby hadn't even been born yet and confidently shared the struggles I had continued to face with my toddler and the encouragement, "*[D]o whatever makes sleep happen! There are no rules.*"

As the years went on and the relationships within The Group deepened, it became my go-to space for sharing the things that might have been misunderstood on my main social media pages. It became a space in which I could vent without preface or explanation. When my Ph.D. graduation ceremony was canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I went to The Group first because I knew that the mothers there would understand the enormity of the loss, and when I struggled with emergency homeschooling my young children while also teaching my own classes, and guiding my college students through the chaos the pandemic had thrown their lives into, The Group was a constant source of support with everything from time management techniques to toy suggestions.

Discussion

There were many insights that came from our exploration of The Group and our experiences as members, and they coalesce into three primary categories: the importance of incorporating multiple domains (e.g., academic and maternal), the role of The Group in anchoring our identities, and the logistical features of The Group that promote its utility as a long-term source of virtual support. Each of these themes has both theoretical implications for scholars wishing to conduct future research on interpersonal relationships and online communities—especially in the context of support during transition—as well as practical implications for those seeking to create or join such virtual spaces.

With respect to the first theme, the importance of incorporating multiple domains, our stories highlight the importance of both practical and social support in The Group. Indeed, questions about how to navigate new parenting and professional challenges had multiple functions. Beyond the practical benefit of ameliorating stressors during our period of dual liminality, the mere fact that others could relate was pivotal in reducing our feelings of alienation, as many of us did not have others in our personal lives who had undergone the unique experiences associated with being a new mother in graduate school. While other sources of support offered practical help for new mothers, many of the solutions (such as reducing work to part-time, taking extended leaves, or simply getting another job) were not feasible in our stage of academia, and the prevalence of these suggestions in other groups was at once unhelpful and discouraging. By providing advice that was situated within the constraints and challenges of an early academic career, The Group offered beneficial insights that promoted our success while making us feel connected to a larger community.

Moreover, the overlap of personal and professional domains in The Group enabled the breakdown of traditional academic hierarchies and highlighted for us the value and possibility of whole personhood. That is, through the questions, stories, and support offered by other members of The Group, we were able to see multiple versions of what academic motherhood could be, and the ways that academic mothers are "normal people" just like us. This was reinforced by our own varied roles in The Group as both expert and novice, roles that shifted over time as relationships solidified within The Group. Importantly, the broader simultaneity of expertise and novice roles unsettles the traditional hierarchy that was salient to us as graduate students and early career professionals. In so doing, The Group redefined and expanded the category of "expert," as we came to understand that even those farther along in their careers faced challenges and needed assistance in multiple domains, as professionals and as parents. This normalized statements of not knowing—something radical within the academy—where professional roles depend upon the assumption of absolute expertise.

Second, the enduring role of The Group, and the personal relationships and trust we developed over the past several years, provided a relational anchor for our evolving identities. Indeed, while our identities as both mothers and professionals were "betwixt and between" in periods of compound identity transition, we could increasingly lean on the trusting relationships we had developed in The Group to know that a part of our identity—the "Academic Mama*" that we had become so proud to associate with—would not change regardless of our professional and personal transitions. This relational anchoring function became especially important as we moved to new geographic locations and professional departments where we felt like the "only one" who was having our experience of being a new academic and a new mother. Ultimately, The Group became a "portable community" (Chayko, 2008) in which we would continue to have mutually supportive relationships regardless of our transitions.

Finally, the evolution of The Group's structure has provided unique benefits that will enable continued support through future periods of change. Specifically, because The Group was closed to new members a few years after it was established, we have an unusual intimacy. We have established and been able to build on relationships of mutual trust and vulnerability without the uncertainty of developing relationships with potential new members. This, combined with a norm of discretion, enables us to share openly without worrying about risk to our professional reputation.

Looking forward, we see The Group as an important anchor in our future experiences of academic motherhood. In addition to our transitions through motherhood and academia, others in The Group have undergone subsequent births, family death, divorce, tenure, illness, and other major life transitions that were supported by The Group. Given this bounded group of trusted and supporting women, we feel confident that when we experience professional transitions—such as promotion and tenure processes, publishing books and articles, stepping into mentorship roles—and personal transitions—such as sending our children to kindergarten, buying our children their first cell phones, and watching them develop their own friends and social lives—we will be able to rely on the members of The Group to understand and support us through those changes as well.

Conclusion

The Group has become more than a message board—it has become a hub for a tightly knit community of academic mothers all over the world that will anchor our unique identities as they continue to change. It served as a place to develop our complex new identities by both giving and receiving support in the context of a stable, caring group of members. In supporting our whole personhood beyond the compartmentalized help that often comes in niche online communities, members of The Group served as an anchor during the liminal period of our ever-changing identities, which was critical to the eventual success of our transitions.

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How Academic Mothers Experience Face Threatening Acts and Reinforcing Facework on Instagram

Amanda Grace Taylor

Conversational partners tend to expect politeness (i.e., efforts to be courteous of another person) in everyday social interactions. Many people have been trained in politeness tactics (e.g., saying "please" and "thank you," or not talking loudly in a library) by their caregivers at a young age. As children develop into young adults and beyond, it is important to consider how politeness operates in different social contexts. This chapter explores how academic mothers engage in politeness on Instagram, a social media platform that centers the everyday exchange of photos and videos.

While many people assume they know how to be polite in a given setting, communicating politeness is complicated and nuanced based on many factors such as gender, culture, relational closeness, race, age, class, and modality. Consider the following scenario (1) which features a conversation on social media:

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> (Original post contains a picture of cookies from Person 1 with the caption—'Celebrating summer break by baking chocolate chip cookies with the kids')
>
> Person 2 (in the comment section): Wow, do you know how much sugar those have in them? I hope you're not giving them to your children.
>
> Person 1 (comment response): LOL! I don't think one will hurt. Everyone deserves a treat once in a while, right?
>
> Person 2 (comment response): Sorry, I guess you're right. I was just thinking that you're such a good mom and probably used natural sweetener.
>
> Person 1 (comment response): Yes! We used banana and then some granulated sugar for taste.
>
> Person 2 (comment response): You do what you think is best!

This scenario will be revisited later in the chapter; however, it reveals some of the complicated considerations associated with communicating politeness on social media. For example, it is important to consider the public space where this conversation is occurring. The post's reach must be taken into consideration as posts on social networking sites (SNS) may be open to the public or closed to a designated group of friends. As Tajfel (1982) theorized in social identity theory, in any given social interaction there are individuals who are a part of a person's *in-group* or *out-group*. An *in-group* refers to people who share a collective identity whereas an *out-group consists of people who are excluded from the in-group* (Adler et al., 2015). While negative interactions can occur online from both in-group and out-group members, consider a different scenario (2) below:

> (Original post contains a picture of cookies from Person 1 with the caption—'Celebrating summer break by baking chocolate chip cookies with the kids')
>
> *Person 2 (in the comment section): Wow those look wonderful! You're such a great mom baking with your kids on summer break. I think I might do the same with my kids today. Truly an inspiration* ❤️

This (hypothetical) interaction shows a possible in-group interaction as both parties share the identity of being a parent. It also illustrates the possibility that some strategically consider others in their communicative acts by using politeness strategies that attend to a person's positive face (i.e., expressing messages that affirm, appreciate, and convey approval of the other person) and negative face (i.e., expressing messages that emphasize the other person's freedom and autonomy; see Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Person 2 performs politeness strategies by expressing approval of *Person 1* and attending to her positive face.

In the chapter, I explore how politeness can be used as a form of social support and solidarity for academic mothers on social media platforms. Deriving from psychological and sociological traditions, social support has been defined from the communication perspective as "*verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid*" (MacGeorge et al., 2011, p. 317). The chapter uses this definition as it focuses on supportive messages that people exchange in the academic mothers community on Instagram. To begin, I first review the literature about mothers in the academy, academic motherhood in online communities, and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Next, I detail the method and findings of a qualitative content analysis that examines how academic mothers use politeness strategies to build online communities and connections on Instagram.

Mothers in the Academy

The academy was not built with working mothers in mind (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2015). Although higher education institutions have made significant strides to be more inclusive of mothers, systemic oppression (e.g., inequitable department policies, gender salary gaps, and increased service expectations of women) has kept academic mothers from thriving (Low & Martin, 2019). In the chapter, I define *academic mothers* as individuals who identify as mothers (i.e., including non-biological mothers, biological mothers, stepmothers, pregnant people, foster moms, and single moms) and are employed as full-time or part-time faculty or staff, or as graduate assistants at a higher education institution.

To begin, many academic mothers are shouldering significant professional and personal workloads. Hochschild (1989) explained how many working women are required to sustain two shifts: one at their place of employment and the second when they come home from work. In many households, mothers continue to be primarily responsible for domestic duties like childcare and household chores (Carreiro, 2021; Dickson, 2020). Extending this line of logic, Kramarae (2001) argued that academic women—especially students—are juggling a third shift that consists of ongoing educational labor (e.g., reading, research, coursework). Sustaining these three shifts can be very challenging, and sometimes academic mothers must make difficult decisions related to their professional and personal commitments (Sills, 2020). The academy should create grant programs and flexible policies for those who have children (Castaneda & Isgro, 2013). This is especially important to create equity for academic mothers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Azim & Salem, 2022; Collective et al., 2021; Fulweiler et al., 2021).

In addition, academic women experience unique time constraints, such as competing "biological" and tenure clocks. The average age to graduate with an advanced degree and enter a tenure-track career often overlaps with women's childbearing years (Iverson, 2012). Many academics must make the difficult decision to prioritize their career over personal commitments, or the other way around. This is a decision that disproportionately affects women and has the potential to create anxieties that could be mitigated through the creation of more inclusive career advancement policies and procedures (Williams, 2005).

Furthermore, women tend to perform a disproportionately large level of academic service work (e.g., Guarino & Borden, 2017). Although this labor provides opportunities for faculty to engage in shared governance, voice concerns, and expand their professional networks, processes pertaining to tenure, promotion, and merit tend to devalue service compared to other domains of faculty work such as research and teaching. This is problematic, considering that women are asked more frequently and expected to perform more service than men (Guarino & Borden, 2017; Misra et al., 2011; O'Meara et al., 2017), and service activities (e.g., recruitment events) can fall on weekends and evenings when childcare is scarce and costly.

Gender differences may manifest uniquely by academic discipline. For example, in some male-dominated STEM fields, women faculty have expressed feeling increased pressure from being the only women in their department. They are often compared inequitably to their male counterparts and expected to perform extra labor related to women-lead initiatives (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2015). Additionally, across fields, colleagues and students often expect women (and especially women of color) to be more agreeable, nurturing, and pleasant in their interpersonal interactions (Sandier, 1991). While their responsibilities and day-to-day obstacles may differ by discipline, rank, race, and other intersecting identities, academic mothers share many similar challenges as they navigate their careers.

Although the ideals of "successful academics" and "good mothers" are not universally understood, dominant discourses tend to marginalize academic mothers. In a study utilizing discursive analysis, Raddon (2002) observed dominant discourses depicted "successful academics" as individuals who devote all their energy and time to support their university's mission by publishing scholarship, winning grants, mentoring students and colleagues, and teaching students. Raddon (2002) reported:

> While it is not explicit that the 'successful academic' should be a man, or indeed a child-free woman, a number of aspects would seem to stand in the way of mothers being able to succeed in this field and to fit into these values, namely:
>
> - the material realities of women's primary responsibility for caring and domestic work in the family in the majority of cultures and countries;
> - the fact that academic mothers have to take time out of their career to have children;
> - that they often dominate the lower-level and part-time jobs in universities. (p. 391)

Unpacking this quote further, Raddon (2002) inferred the dominant discourse of being a "good mother" is defined as giving selfless care in both the home and career. Raddon (2002) called for university equal opportunity policies to go beyond making sure academic mothers are "present and accounted for" to ensure they can survive and thrive in the academy. While university decision-makers strive to make progress in this area, academic mothers might turn to SNS to connect with larger in-group networks and to seek and exchange social support.

Academic Motherhood in Online Communities

Computer mediated communication (CMC) offers a way to defy time and space. Although there are challenges associated with interpersonal communication over CMC channels, there are benefits such as the ability to broaden the scope of community on a global scale. Moravec (2011) addressed how the "modern mother" engages in online communities with other mothers. She revealed how online communities can shape many stages of motherhood from pregnancy to child rearing in teenage years. At the time of Moravec's writing, SNS were still in their infant stage with Internet denizens utilizing platforms such as Myspace, Facebook, and Flicker. Hundreds of SNS have emerged in the last few years and have created opportunities for academic mothers to connect. One of the emerging SNS that came on the scene in 2010 and has grown to have over 1.38 billion users is Instagram (IG) (Business of Apps, 2021).

Instagram

IG is a public social media platform where photographs (i.e., visual stories), videos, and captions/comments (i.e., reactions) are shared with the possibility of creating a community. Mackson et al. (2019) reported that women spent more time on IG and experienced more IG anxiety and less loneliness than men. IG offers non-mutual relationships where although one user can follow another, reciprocation is not a default of the platform. This is unique compared to Facebook or LinkedIn where when one user "friends" or "connects" with another, and then both are linked to each other (Wong et al., 2019). Individuals can use IG to present different forms of themselves such as their identities as an academic, parent, friend, and/or traveler.

Hashtags

In this study, I examine IG as a channel of social support. On IG, people can use hashtags in their post's caption or in their story (i.e., a temporary short video or story that will be featured for only 24 h) as a way of sorting or categorizing topics on the Internet (Cunningham, 2013). An individual might choose to use a specific hashtag for a post to identify with a group or category. For example, Marcon et al. (2019) conducted a study around #breastfeeding, #breastmilk, and #breastisbest to analyze conversations around breastfeeding on IG. They found the most common IG posts featured people breastfeeding while doing an activity such as yoga or stand-up paddle boarding. There were instances in the captions and comments where users expressed difficulty with either pumping breastmilk or breastfeeding. The response was overwhelmingly met with recommendations, motivational statements, and empathy. Informed partially by the possibility of hashtags to create a specific online community, this project seeks to understand the ways that politeness manifests in conversations around hashtags.

Politeness Theory

Politeness theory is predicated on Goffman's (1967) notion of *face* and claims universal application. According to Goffman, *face* can be defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [herself, themself] by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (1967, p. 5); that is to say, a person's face is the image they present for other people to see. Goffman explains that every person has a negative face (i.e., the desire to be autonomous) and a positive face (i.e., the desire to be liked). These two aspects of face are present in any given social situation.

The ways individuals present their face can vary by context (Goffman, 1959). If one is with their friends at a coffee shop, for example, they might wish to be seen as a good listener, empathetic, and relaxed, whereas if they are in a business meeting on Zoom, they might wish to appear intelligent, tech-savvy, and commanding and so present themselves accordingly. The meta-theoretical assumptions of face theory are embedded in the interpretivist paradigm of symbolic interactionism (Metts & Cupach, 2015). Goffman's face theory continues to be found in modern day research and practical applications when seeking to understand identity and interpersonal interactions. For example, DeGroot and Vik (2021) explored how mothers maintain face and perform motherhood in public spaces. Their results indicated that mothers were less likely to communicate online about negative aspects of being a mother due to positive face threats.

To mitigate face threatening acts (FTA) and support others' face, facework "reflects communication strategies that people use to establish, sustain, or restore a preferred social identity to others" (Samp, 2015, p. 1). Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory considers how individuals use language to restore the public image of themselves or other people. They offer four politeness strategies for navigating FTA and reinforcing facework: "'positive politeness' (roughly, the expression of solidarity), 'negative politeness' (roughly, the expression of restraint) and 'off-record (politeness)' (roughly, the avoidance of unequal-vocal impositions)" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 2). The fourth strategy is bald on the record and is a disregard for the individual's face. Communicators use positive politeness strategies to connect to an individual or group and might include actions such as giving the person a nickname or using "we" as a pronoun. Negative politeness appeals to the other person's need to be left alone and might include linguistic strategies such as apologizing for interrupting or minimizing a disturbance. Off-record politeness relies on implications in vocal and content. With this strategy the speaker communicates indirectly by giving clues, dropping hints, or using metaphors, riddles, or irony. Taking these notions into consideration, we might analyze Scenario 1 from above.

> *Person 1 (Original post contains a picture of cookies from person 1 with the caption—'Celebrating summer break by baking chocolate chip cookies with the kids')* **(Person 1 might be trying to present her face as a person who is a good baker, an involved/good parent, and an individual who uses her time wisely during the summer break to invest in their children.)**
>
> *Person 2 (in the comment section): Wow do you know how much sugar those have in them? I hope you're not giving them to your children …* **(FTA is taken by implying Person 1 is a bad mom if she gives her children too much sugar.)**
>
> *Person 1 (comment response): LOL I don't think one will hurt. Everyone deserves a treat once in a while, right?* **(Person 1 is attempting to repair her face by stating this is a 'treat' and not a part of the normal nutritional diet of her children. The 'right' at the end gives way for a positive politeness strategy.)**
>
> *Person 2 (comment response): Sorry, I guess you're right. I was just thinking that you're such a good mom and have probably used natural sweetener in the cookies.* **(The apology is an attempt to repair face followed by a [potentially] positive politeness strategy.)**
>
> *Person 1 (comment response): Yes! We used banana and then just some granulated sugar for taste.* **(The individual repairs her face.)**
>
> *Person 2 (comment response): You do what you think is best!* **(This could be seen as a negative politeness strategy as it underscores Person's 1 freedom to behave as she pleases; however, in a public format this message might fall short of face restoration as tone of voice can be perceived as sarcastic and the public nature of the comment can feel insincere.)**

This scenario speaks to many nuances of communication. The speakers might not read or take the time to understand the position of the other due to the immediacy of exchanges on IG. Also, online communication brings a public aspect where each user is cognizant that other users may see the interaction. Being rejected publicly on SNS can be particularly painful and foster retaliatory thoughts. For example, Chen (2015) concluded that when an individual experiences threats to positive face by strangers on social media, the result is often a negative emotion and sometimes regulatory aggression to restore face. However, evidence suggests that social support can be received on social networking sites such as IG. Let's consider Scenario 2 from above:

> (Original post contains a picture of cookies from Person 1 with the caption—'Celebrating summer break by baking chocolate chip cookies with the kids')

> *Person 2 (in the comment section): Wow, those look wonderful! You're such a great mom baking with your kids on summer break. I think I might do the same with my kids today. Truly an inspiration* ❤️ **(Person 2 enacts an off-the-record politeness strategy.)**

Even if Person 2 believes that baking and feeding children chocolate chip cookies is a bad idea due to the sugar content, they avoid an FTA and create a polite response to bolster Person 1's face and portray her as a good mother who is involved in an activity with her children. As individuals seek to develop, construct, and maintain their public persona (Kelly et al., 2019) through a variety of contexts, this framework is useful in understanding how academic mothers experience face threats and social support through politeness online. Academic mothers might experience unique FTA and reinforcing facework that shows expressions of solidarity and builds on restorative facework. Summers and Clarke (2015) found that "as feminists we feel torn between our work and our children and have felt the urge to give in completely to motherhood" (p. 245). As IG offers a space for phatic communication in the comments section, it is an area where FTA can take place alongside facework in a community of people who share mutual experiences.

Assuming the IG account belongs to a human and not a bot (i.e., a web robot), it is important to take into consideration the feelings of those involved in the online interaction. When an individual posts something on a SNS, they do not want to be shamed or humiliated online (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021). Studies have yet to consider the intersection of academic mothers and politeness theory in an online context. It is, however, important to consider the lived experiences of academic mothers in an online environment as this is a space where many have the potential to find support.

To address the gaps in the literature and increase the understanding of the intersection of academic motherhood, identity, and politeness theory, I employed an inductive approach to answer the following research questions:

RQ1a: How often are academic mothers experiencing FTA on IG?
RQ1b: What politeness strategies do responders use in the comments of the IG post?

This first set of research questions are designed to be broad, exploratory questions. It is also a desired outcome of this study to explore the interplay of the hashtag community of academic mothers on IG. Specifically, #academicmom will be explored on IG through the lens of politeness theory with the following inquiries:

RQ2a: What types of FTA are being discussed under the #academicmom?
RQ2b: How is social support exchanged under the #academicmom?

METHOD

On September 22, 2020, a data scrape using Octoparse (i.e., an automatic web scraping tool used for data extraction) was generated based on the #academicmom that pulled data from IG from the last three months. I conducted a qualitative analysis using the data generated that was initially 282-line items of data and narrowed according to the following selection criteria: (1) posts were written in English (as this is the only language I am proficient in), (2) posts had at least one comment (as this indicates at least two individuals are interacting), (3) posts were not duplicated, and (4) posts that identified obstacles or FTA (i.e., as identified by the author when reading through the post caption and comments). After applying the selection criteria, 23-line items remained (8.15% of original data set).

I conducted a thematic analysis on the data using a both *in vivo* and *descriptive coding*, as Manning and Kunkel (2013) explained that "a mixture of *in vivo* and descriptive coding sometimes is helpful for making sense of data where topical codes seem elusive but where the research is intent on locking in on them quickly" (p. 36). The process of *in vivo coding* involves using participants' language (Strauss, 1987), and descriptive coding involved thematic coding to identify key topics and subtopics (Gibbs, 2018). *In vivo* coding directly informed categories related to politeness theory, and I applied descriptive coding as the remaining line items were read through and coded according to emerging themes of the original posts. I also read and coded comments to those posts according to what politeness strategies (i.e., on the record, positive politeness, negative politeness, or off the record) were used.

Positionality Statement

As interpretive reports are strongly informed by the worldview of the researcher, it is important that I state my position. As an educated, cisgender, White woman from the U.S., I acknowledge that I come from positions of privilege. Because I am not a mother, I approach this work with respect and remain committed to reflexivity throughout my project as I remember to engage with material and not talk for this group. I also remained reflexive by considering the data through multiple tones and reflecting on how my social and political positions might affect my interpretations. Prior to starting this project and throughout its development, I immersed myself in the literature on academic mothers; this scholarship provided me with foundational understandings that informed my analyses and helped me report findings about the relationships between academic mothers and politeness theory on IG.

Findings

To answer RQ1a, which asked how often academic mothers experience FTA on IG, I sorted data to focus solely on posts that included FTA and the other three criteria mentioned above. Among this study's original 282 IG posts, 158 posts were duplicates, 56 posts did not include an FTA, 44 posts had less than two comments, and 1 post was not in English. When all the criteria were applied, a total of 23 posts remained that used #academicmom and were FTA. This means that only 8% of the posts analyzed involved an FTA presented in the image, caption, or comment section. Among the 23 posts, approximately 30.4% were from the Michelle | Mrs Mummy PhD® (Mrs. Mummy PhD) account that focuses on navigating struggles of academic mothers. Some were IG business or influencer accounts and were potentially monetized and managed by multiple individuals.

RQ1b aimed to identify IG responders' politeness strategies. Two-thirds (i.e., 66%) of the comments offered a positive politeness strategy. That is, individuals attempted to restore the original poster's positive face by letting them know they were liked and supported. For example, Mrs Mummy PhD captioned, "Let me know in the comments if this resonates with you and what keeps you going!" is an example of solidarity and in-group desire to seek out reinforcement through mutual identity. The second core strategy was off the record which appeared in 60% of the comments. For example, indirect comments were given that encouraged account user Vanessa Lavallée on the outcome of her hard work such as “Looking forward to reading it!!🤓 📖” from one user and “Gogogo❤️ 🔥 the audience is waiting😍 😍” from another.

RQ2a asked what FTA were discussed in IG posts that contained #academicmom. To answer this question, both implied FTA and overt FTA were taken into consideration. A total of 43% of the FTA had to do with time. Specifically, they involved questions or statements about balancing time to get ahead in one’s career, be a good mother, and take time for self-care. For example, consider the two posts of mothers where they reported working during their maternity leave. These two social media posts are described below:

1st Image: The first image shows a computer with two documents open, and a pile of books stacked by the computer. The caption reads, “I’m writing a book chapter due 2 months ago … #productivity #academicmom #motivation #bookwarm #backontrack” the comment reads “Welcome to the book community! 🥰Very nice meeting you and warm welcomes!🤗 📗 If you’d enjoy entertaining book reviews and book recommendations, come visit my page! Always happy to help! Warmest of welcomes! Books are such a delight with friends! 😊 🌟 📖

2nd Image: The second image on the right shows a person sitting in a chair, typing on the computer with one hand and holding a baby in the other arm. The caption reads “This is what maternity leave looks like in academia. #academicmom.” A comment from another user reads “You’re on leave?! Get off the computer and go get some Benny snuggles—it’s your right!!🙌🏼 💙” the original user replies “haha! I did. I do a bit of work in the morning. Huge grant due soon.”

Both images reflect the same FTA for both individuals as they disclosed working during maternity leave. The first image features an off-the-record response in the comments (to a potentially FTA of the #academicmom working during maternity leave), and commenters do not issue any FTA toward the person in the post. Instead, they offer support to welcome the poster into the “book community.” The second shows an interaction where the commenter reveals the FTA with a threat to negative face. The commenter instructs the poster to “get off their computer” stating that “it is your right” during maternity leave not to work. This presents a threat to negative face as the poster has the desire and right to work during maternity leave if they would like to. The person commenting—regardless of the potential motivation to mitigate the pressure felt by the poster to get work done while on maternity leave—put the person doing the post in a position to manage an FTA taking place in a public domain.

Finally, RQ2b asked how social support was exchanged in IG posts that included #academicmom. In the introduction of the chapter, social support was defined in the communicative tradition of exchanges with the intention of aiding another person who is perceived to be in need through communicative messages. The findings revealed two important finds when answering this question. First, when reinforcing facework was needed, the data revealed that 75% of the time it was the person who initiated the post who responded to initiate facework. The remaining 25% had responses to the original poster with others reinforcing. That is, when an FTA occurred, the individual or individuals that instigated the original post would respond with empathy and/or supportive interaction. Individuals who initiated posts largely took control of their social identity. This finding runs counter to the assumption that social support should be provided to original posters (who might be disclosing problems or challenges in their lives). Instead, the individuals who are catalyzing IG conversations seem to also be key players in the provision of social support.

The second key finding around how social support is exchanged on IG posts was that the community of individuals using #academicmom would reply to self-disclosure of FTA with empathy or supportive comments using emojis or and written messages. In posts where the original poster revealed the FTA, there were replies of solidarity. For example, when one user posted about their obstacle of navigating their PhD program and homeschooling three children at the time, Mrs Mummy PhD, replied “know that’s not an easy undertaking. You’re amazing!❤️❤️”

Discussion

Using Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory as a guide, the chapter explores how FTA and facework are experienced by academic mothers on IG posts using #academicmom. I conducted a qualitative content analysis to categorize emerging themes that occur from the responses to posts that use #academicmom on IG. Overall, this investigation made strides in understanding how FTA and reinforcing facework are being used to impact the well-being of academic mothers.

Overwhelmingly, commenters used positive politeness strategies to let the poster know that they were liked and/or supported. For example, in response to an expression of navigating the grad student and mom life, @ mrsmummyphod commented, "Congratulations again lovely! Hope you and baby are doing well.❤️ 🥰" In several situations, IG users showed empathy, and individuals formed community. Politeness strategies played a part in each of the posts as strategic communication was used to consider the original poster's feelings.

Prior literature reported that mothers chose to reveal more positive aspects of mothering rather than negative aspects due to perceived threats to face (DeGroot & Vik, 2021). The data here further supported this literature as it was found that there were relatively few FTA revealed using the #academicmom (i.e., approximately 20% of the sample posts were not considered as they did not reveal an FTA). This could indicate that academic mothers may be reluctant to disclose challenges due to its link to not being seen as a successful academic or mother. As stated in the literature review of the chapter, the dominant discourse of the ideal "successful academic" is a man or child-free women (Raddon, 2002). The themes of time constraints, not having a work-life balance, and feelings of guilt that were disclosed in the IG posts analyzed revile the academy has largely not implemented flexible policies for academic mothers that would allow them to thrive.

The findings of this study parallel the prior mentioned study from Marcon et al. (2019) report that mothers exchanged messages of recommendations, motivational statements, and empathy around conversations of breastfeeding. When answering RQ2b, it was found that IG users exchange messages of social support under the #academicmom, by encouraging individuals revealing the FTA through expressions of relating and cheering on the academic mother. While previous literature does support that mothers engage in online communities with other mothers online (Moravec, 2011), this study made contributions in extending literature to show ways of how academic mothers are engaging in online support and community-building.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is how IG's settings and functions may have impacted the data collection process. For example, a user can delete any comments made to their post. It could be that FTA were taking place in the comments; however, they might have been deleted by the end user. In addition, the data retrieved came from public accounts. Many users on IG can make their accounts private, and thus the conversations would not be found in this study's data.

It is unclear what the relationship was between the posters who were engaging in the exchanges over IG using #academicmom. This might influence the study's findings as relationships might be taking place offline, and some might be unknown to the posters. Moreover, some academic mothers do not have an IG account or did not include #academicmom in their posts. No inferential conclusions are being drawn about the population of academic mothers; instead, this exploratory study examined the lived experiences of academic mothers using the #academicmom on IG at a given time. To gain a more nuanced understanding of these intersections, this study could be replicated to over a longer period of time and compared to the ways academic mothers exchange support on SNS beyond IG.

Conclusion and Application

Individuals present different forms of themselves in various contexts including on SNS. As academic mothers might experience unique FTA and reinforcing facework on SNS, it is important that universities speak to the ways that academic mothers have experienced systemic oppression. For example, Hunter (2014) acknowledges that many academic mothers, especially those who are women of color, experience low levels of support. In addition to the exchange of high-quality support among peers and in online communities, institutions of higher education must change policies, practices, and inequitable structures to better support academic mothers.

This represents just one good example of honoring academic mothers. For these reasons and more, academic mothers go online to gain community and solidarity. Overall, this chapter worked toward bridging the gap in literature between politeness theory and academic mothers. Moving forward, I offer three distinct calls to praxis. The first is to acknowledge the challenges faced by mothers in the academy, as this will allow institutions and individuals to identify how they might be harming the community. IG account users provided a space under the hashtag of #academicmom to talk about some of these challenges. Academic decision-makers (who may or may not be academic mothers) should listen to these public conversations as they implement inclusive policies. The second is for readers in the in-group of academic mothers to consider IG as a potential space to gain support and engage in community-building online. Finally, individuals in the out-group that desire to show support should understand the relationship of politeness strategies to IG communities to better maintain relationships and build online communities that support academic mothers. Although this is not the first study to consider the performance of motherhood online, this chapter did contribute to this space by supporting and extending prior literature. It is important for in-groups seeking support and out-groups that desire to show support through language on social media.

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#GradStudentMom Finds Community Online

Lori Arnold

I began my PhD program in Fall 2016, while 34 weeks pregnant. Not completely understanding the stigma that women often face in academia when they begin pursuing motherhood (Evans & Grant, 2008), I immediately disclosed my pregnancy to the head of graduate studies. She was very supportive until I mentioned that I already had two toddlers. She then laughed and called me "crazy." This continued to be the reaction throughout my graduate school career when I disclosed my status as not only a graduate student mom, but also a mom of multiple children. I struggled to find mentorship within my department because most of the faculty (as either not parents or parents of one child) simply could not relate to the challenges I faced. I quickly discovered that becoming the mother to one child after earning tenure is still a normal experience for many women in academia. While it is becoming more common for PhD students to bring industry experience with them into academia, it is still unexpected for a woman to transition from the role of a stay-at-home

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mom to academia. Thus, I turned to the internet to find mentorship and community with mothers in similar situations.

I also noticed many of my peers were not aware of the challenges I faced and would be very surprised when I shared simple details about my working habits. I began sharing my experience of motherhood and graduate school through the adoption of a specific hashtag online. #Graduatestudentmom became the primary means I used to make visible otherwise hidden aspects of my experience. I first started using the hashtag on Instagram, featuring posts of myself holding my infant while reading for graduate courses. However, I found that not many people were using this hashtag on Instagram, and there tended to be less engagement on this social media platform. I quickly turned to Twitter to relate aspects of my graduate student experience to other people on the internet. I discovered the rhetorical velocity (DeVoss & Ridolfo, 2009) of hashtags on Twitter when my tweets about waking up at 4 am to write or being interrupted when trying to read during naptime began to receive engagement from accounts with some combination of "academic" and "mother" in their Twitter handle or with something about being a mother and an academic in their bio.

My purpose in sharing my experiences of motherhood and PhD work on Twitter was two-fold. First, I hoped my colleagues who were not parents themselves would become more aware of the challenges involved in adding the responsibilities of parenthood to the workload of a PhD student. By openly sharing both my triumphs (completed my PhD in the allotted time and did not fall behind in the program) and my failures (did not achieve a peer reviewed publication by graduation and frequently considered dropping out), I was able to find a community that related to the odd juxtaposition of reading Plato while my young children watched *Paw Patrol*. Through following #graduatestudentmom and several academic motherhood-focused accounts on Twitter, I discovered that I was not alone. Other women had gone through similar experiences, had finished their PhDs, and most importantly, both they and their children survived. In moments of particular struggle, I could tweet about a specific circumstance I was struggling with and would quickly receive encouragement that I could continue. Additionally, as I mentioned earlier, there were not many professors I could go to for guidance in my program because they could not relate to the specific challenges I faced, so my academic motherhood community on Twitter also frequently offered advice on navigating challenges such as learning to read and write more efficiently because I had less time to work as well as more generally how to negotiate asking for accommodations or extensions.

The lack of understanding that I witnessed in my program as I experienced the birth of my third child mid-semester showed me that motherhood continues to remain invisible in academia. I believe this allows the perpetuation of patriarchal notions regarding women's ability to maintain a career while also becoming mothers. Thus, my Twitter account became my own act of feminist resistance. I would not allow my colleagues and professors to forget that some women will choose motherhood and academia. While it may be very challenging, with support it is possible. My first tweet using #gradstudentmom is a selfie of me wearing my three-week-old baby in a sling with the caption, "'Sometimes when grad school is overwhelming, I wake up at 5:30 and take the baby to study at Sbux.' #gradschoolproblems #gradstudentmom" (Arnold, 2016). The problem I am referring to in this tweet is two-fold: (1) the overwhelming amount of reading I was assigned in coursework (relatable for all grad students) and (2) the need to be present to care for my newborn, while also not waking up my two toddlers. The juxtaposition of motherhood and academia continued in tweets such as, "'There is nothing quite so meta for me as reading articles about maternal empowerment while nursing an infant' #gradstudentmom" (Arnold, 2016) and "'Well, the preschooler wouldn't nap or stay quiet, so I read 35 pages before he woke the baby up' #gradstudentmom #isitbedtimeyet" (Arnold, 2017). Many tweets celebrated overcoming the challenges of trying to read and write at a high intellectual level, while also keeping three small humans alive. My colleagues may not have been able to relate to the innovative ways I found to accomplish the demands of graduate work, but I knew that other academic moms on Twitter could.

However, I also chose to be more vulnerable and share some of my struggles and fears. For example, I tweeted, "I may flunk out of grad school from sheer lack of time to work" (Arnold, 2017) when I feared that I would fail the first year review and be asked to leave the program. I chose not to use the #gradstudentmom for this tweet because it did not specifically mention motherhood; however, anyone who had read my Twitter feed would recognize the source of my frustration. I survived that semester and the next one, but the looming specter of preliminary exams caused severe anxiety which led to the following tweet: "'I may have had a meltdown in the shower this morning because I don't think I'll be able to complete my prelims reading in time. Then my kids stayed in bed for another 45 minutes and I was able to read. Small miracles' #thisismotherhood #gradstudentmom" (Arnold, 2018). While I first primarily received engagement with my tweets from friends and colleagues, as I continued to curate a Twitter account focused on the intersection of academia and motherhood, I began to develop an informal community of other academic mothers. They cheered me on when I experienced triumphs and encouragement or advice when I experienced challenges or disappointments. I developed some friendships with graduate students in my field that led to real life friendships when I met them at a conference I attended. However, the community of academic mothers is quite diverse, and I have enjoyed learning about perspectives outside of my field and even outside of the United States.

As I began reviewing my tweets to write this essay, I found myself confronted with memories of just how difficult it was to complete a PhD while my children were so young. At times it is tempting to block out these struggles, but my Twitter archive serves as a helpful reminder for me of what the experience was truly like. I continue to participate in this informal discourse community of academic mothers and particularly focus on encouraging other graduate student mothers and providing advice when asked for it. I hope to provide the kind of encouragement and care for others that I received on Twitter throughout my PhD work.

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Being Alone Together: The Affordances and Constraints of Social Media Groups for Single Moms

Emily Donald and Alexandria Hanson

INTRODUCTION

Support for parents in academia often sits on shaky ground. While colleges and universities may tout "family-friendly" rhetoric, a deeper look into their policies, supportive systems, and structures makes clear that family friendliness has its limitations. Such limitations can be seen and felt by the overrepresentation of women in non-tenure-track positions (53.9%), as well as the salary disparities where "full-time women faculty members make approximately 81.2 percent of men's salaries" (Colby & Fowler, 2020, para. 3). These limitations can also be seen in the "leaky pipeline," where the system that is supposed to be a lockstep set of movements, a pipeline

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that funnels people from PhD programs into tenure-track jobs in higher education, instead faces an issue of attrition that disproportionately impacts "more often than not women, more often than not queer women, more often than not queer women of color, and more often than not raising kids on their own" (Van Duyne, 2020, para. 19). Add to all of this the maternal wall, a type of gender discrimination experienced by mothers that acts as a "formidable barrier to career advancement" (Rodino-Colocino et al., 2017, p. 200), and the veneer of family friendliness begins to crack.

Such fracturing is in part because higher education is built on the ideal worker model, a term created by Arlie Hochschild (1997) that refers to a cisgender, able-bodied, straight, white male, often without children, *or* if he has children, he has a wife who handles the childrearing responsibilities. The ideal worker has helped create the expectation that academics can devote the majority of their time to an academic career and responsibilities, foregoing family and other life commitments (Armenti, 2004). The ideal worker model is evidenced in multiple facets of academic culture and life—the colleges that sit atop steep hills requiring access to certain material and physical resources to traverse; the emphasis on individual productivity; the faculty meetings that begin at 5:00 pm when parents need to be home with their children; the absence of changing tables, lactation rooms, onsite childcare, and/or high chairs on campuses; the academic conferences that often occur on weekends without childcare support; and many other facets of academic culture and life. Family-friendly policies in higher education exist in a system rooted in the ideal worker model, and all mothers do not experience these policies equally. Such policies include parental leave, tenure-clock extension, and modified responsibilities, for example. However, these policies do not exist consistently across institutions or academic ranks, and taking advantage of them can lead to perceptions of "presumed incompetence" by colleagues (Rodino-Colocino et al., 2017, p. 202).

Jane Juffer (2006) acknowledges the benefits of family-friendly policies while also recognizing their limitations for single parents: "I do not want to dismiss the importance of policy and structural change for *all* parents, but rather to stress that in order to support different family structures—something which many academics would, in theory, advocate—it must be acknowledged that the needs of single parents differ from those of couples who can extensively rely on each other's labor and emotional support" (p. 103). Single mothers and mothers of color have written about how family-friendly policies in higher education do not fully take into consideration their needs or experiences. Michelle Téllez (2013) captures how even though academic policies can seem neutral, “they are actually based on raced, classed, and gender assumptions, which, in effect, penalize marginal faculty members and create obstacles to their full contribution to academic life and scholarship” (p. 81). Téllez writes about her own experiences with such penalization as a single mother of color; she explains how women of color already face obstacles such as isolation and a lack of mentorship, and so they often suffer the most when their roles as mothers and academics are not recognized or supported (p. 89).

The absence of supportive systems and structures can be felt by those with a range of parenting identities, particularly those who do not exist within the heteronormative nuclear family structure. For single mothers, this is especially the case. As they work to counter competing cultural ideologies that ideal mothers are entirely devoted to their children and ideal workers are entirely devoted to their careers, they feel the impact of the maternal wall and, as Nathalie Ségeral (2021) describes, experience “the single academic motherhood double penalty” (p. 140). While the motherhood penalty is reflected in how mothers are less likely to be hired and more likely to be paid less than their childfree counterparts, what Ségeral is referring to is how single moms are penalized even more so due to the stigmatization of a single mom identity. While single mothers draw on multiple resources, strategies, and tactics to scale the maternal wall and resist the double penalty, social media groups have become an essential resource.

Social Media Groups for Single Moms in Academia: Affordances and Limitations

Research has shown that Facebook groups can be a valuable source of information and support for parents of all identities (Lupton et al., 2016; Mansour, 2020), but they are especially important for parents of marginalized identities who may have a more difficult time connecting with others who share their experiences. This includes, for example, parents raising children with disabilities, “raising children in a foreign information environment, raising children as LGBTQIA, and grieving a deceased child” (Mansour, 2020, p. 212). Within this group are also single moms. Facebook has been a central space where single moms find and offer support from and to peers with similar experiences. During the pandemic, this became especially clear, as described by Marika Lindholm (2020) who details how such groups, "offer single moms a safe zone, free of the stigmas and recrimination that often come with being a single mom" (para. 39). Additionally, these groups become sources of support in finding a workflow, getting organized, feeling less alone, and also seeking out advice about an array of challenges unique to the single mom experience (Culina, 2020; Ségeral, 2020). For many single moms, they can also lead to the development of an in-person support network where they meet for coffee, pass on children's outgrown clothes, or "drop off diapers and formula, even while facing their own fears and challenges" (Lindholm, 2020, para. 40).

From early 2018 through Fall 2020, Alex conducted research about the experiences of single moms in higher education.[1] Drawing on survey data from 117 single moms, as well as interviews over the course of a semester with 7 single moms across geographic locations, academic ranks, and single mothering identities, Alex learned about the strategies and tactics single moms use to complete their academic work, specifically related to writing, including the creation of support networks. The participants' responses demonstrated that for single moms in higher education, social media groups are an essential resource. Single moms in Alex's study described experiencing isolation, as they struggle to find other single moms or even single parents in higher education to relate to, and as they also notice that colleagues (parented or not) either avoid talking about children with them or express little interest in their maternal lives. Instead, single moms find that support comes from the people—themselves, family members, and friends. Among these people are Facebook group members. One single mom in the study described using Facebook to reach out to other students who she knows are single parents, and telling them, "I've been through what you've gone through. I'd be happy to talk about it again."

Given that the majority of single moms who participated in Alex's study (76%) either felt sometimes well supported or rarely or never well supported by their academic institutions, and that of 102 respondents, 93 identified their own strategies and tactics as a source of support, 78 identified their friends, and 56 identified their family members, it becomes evident that single moms within higher education need to create and turn to their own groups for support, especially given that there is an absence of existing support systems and structures in academia for this substantial population.

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[1] This research is an IRB-approved study.

More generally, of the total student parents at the undergraduate level, 43% are single moms, and less than one-third of them complete their college degrees (Kruvelis et al., 2017). At the graduate level, "graduate student mothers are at a higher risk of attrition than almost any other group" (Ellis & Gullion, 2015, p. 153), and in the tenure-track, "20 percent of all tenured faculty are single mothers" (M.A. Mason et al., 2013, p. 75). Data about the percentage of single moms in non-tenure track and/or untenured positions is unclear, but in Alex's survey of single mothers in academia, 59 of 117 respondents or 50% were not yet tenured or in non-tenure track positions; this does not include graduate or undergraduate students and postdocs, which would increase the total to 69%. In other words, single moms exist and are a significant component of the population across higher education. They seek out and create their own networks of support in order to survive within higher education, and one space many single moms in academia turn to is Facebook.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of our own experiences in a digital village—a private Facebook group for single parents[2] in academia. Our experiences are organized around three themes, drawing from the work of Maria Kopacz (2021) in "A Hidden Village: Communicative Functions of a Facebook Support Group for Single Mothers." These themes include: group cohesion, offering support, and requesting support. Using these themes as a framework, we describe the unique types of supports found within the private Facebook group for single parents. Emily's experience provides insight into what it's like being an ongoing member of the group, while Alex's reveals what is gained and lost by leaving Facebook, losing a digital village, and then working to build a new support system beyond a digital space. We then shift to exploring the limitations of social media as a digital village for single moms. To explore the limitations of the group, we incorporate not only our own experiences, but also those of two single mom interview participants from Alex's study—Tricia and Danielle. These collective experiences make visible the benefits and necessity of a digital village for single moms, while also emphasizing the need for greater structures and supports to build community within academic institutions.

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[2] We use "parents" here because that is the name of the group; however, at the time of writing, the group was comprised entirely of single mothers.

Single Mom's Experiences in a Digital Village

Before we begin our narrative, we want to acknowledge that these are our specific experiences, which are shaped by our intersecting cultural identities and are likely different from others' experiences. However, we offer this narrative to highlight the sense of possibility within the use of social media groups to support single mothers. We recognize that those of marginalized identities face a range of barriers to getting support and hope that the highlighting of online support for single moms contributes to discussion of how we can ensure moms of all identities receive the support they need.

We were both initially drawn to the private Facebook (FB) community of single mothers in academia due to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Neither of us was able to find the support we needed in the main FB group of academic mothers or in our own lives. At the time Emily discovered this group specifically for single mothers in academia, she was feeling very alone in her journey through adjusting to parenting as a single person, which also coincided with moving for her first full-time academic job in a system that was not designed for her success. She had only partnered parent or single, childless friends (without kids) with whom she could connect in real life. Alex came to the group a semester into her PhD program, when she was going through a divorce while raising a toddler. She was one of two people in her graduate program with children; the other person was four years ahead of her, and they never really connected. As her peers talked about getting together for a concert or meeting up at a local bar after class, she was trying to figure out what kind of apartment she could afford on her limited income while also paying for daycare, and how she was going to prepare for the court appearance she had later that month. In joining the private Facebook group for only single mothers working in academia, we finally experienced recognizing ourselves in posts and feeling heard and understood. We found a group of people who understood our lived experiences because our experiences were also theirs. The group was a "nonjudgmental, private venue for sharing the specific concerns of single mothers in academic careers" (Ségeral, 2020, p. 143). Additionally, members of the group are accomplished. They are lead researchers in their fields, tenured faculty in notable programs at prestigious institutions; the kinds of voices you hear on *NPR* interviews and see on *CNN* broadcasts. We point this out for two reasons: (1) being able to connect with single moms in a range of positions within academia reveals what is possible, and through conversation, indicates how (2) single moms within academia are an accomplished and invaluable group of individuals. Higher education should and could do better in supporting them; otherwise, the loss will be (has been, is) indescribably detrimental.

Our experiences reflect assertions made by Maria Kopacz (2021) in her article, "A Hidden Village: Communicative Functions of a Facebook Support Group for Single Mothers," where she describes how "online communities are important sources of social support and information for individuals affected by life events and social marginalization" (p. 501). Kopacz studies the communication practices in an online support group for single moms and identifies four themes of the "communicative functions of member posts published in a HP [hidden private] Facebook group for single mothers" (p. 506), which include: group cohesion, offering support, expressing emotions, and requesting support. The following sections center on three of these themes: group cohesion, offering support, and requesting support. Although the support group Kopacz studies was not specifically tailored toward single moms in academia, nor did it contain members from across the United States and sometimes the globe, the themes from this research resonated with our experiences. As such, we use it to contextualize our experiences within an online support group for single moms in academia.

Group Cohesion

Kopacz (2021) describes "group cohesion" as "the tendency of a group to unite in pursuit of common goals and tasks, as well as to meet individual members' social and emotional needs" (p. 509). One way Kopacz describes building group cohesion that relates to Emily's experiences is through humor (p. 509). Within the FB group for single mothers in academia, Emily has shared humorous posts about her children, while also enjoying the laughs from those made by other group members. In one post, she shared a picture of her child with a very large serving spoon after she told him he could have one spoonful of sugar in his tea. She mentioned, jokingly, feeling outsmarted by her children quite often and felt connected to others who responded with the laughter emoji or comments. Over time, others in the group have made posts like this that offer a moment of levity in the challenges we all face. Additionally, Kopacz (2021) describes how group cohesion can occur through "offline socializing," which can consist of "posts inviting others to meetings offline … planned group get-togethers, shared local community events, and invit[ing] other members to join for dinner or a drink" (p. 511).

During her time in the FB group, Alex was able to meet with women in person to talk, have dinner, and have her daughter meet other children of single moms to play. These women passed on clothes their kids had outgrown, toys and books their children no longer used, and advice and understanding. These offline interactions were initiated through FB and would not have happened without it. Even though the group is comprised of single moms from across the globe, due to the high membership, there are many single moms from geographic locations in close proximity, allowing for this type of offline socializing. Within the group, seeing women organize gatherings similar to the ones Alex experienced is not unusual. Even though group cohesion is one theme that Kopacz (2021) describes, it is intertwined throughout the other categories as well, as expressing emotions, offering support, and requesting support would not be possible without our unique shared experiences, and feeling seen and connected despite never having met many of the group members in person.

Offering Support

We found the FB for single mothers to be an invaluable resource for support. In her article, Kopacz (2021) specifies three types of support that are offered: "informational, tangible, and emotional" (p. 512). While our experiences center primarily on emotional support, we have also experienced tangible and informational support offered not only by ourselves but by others as well. For example, when Emily was going through a really difficult time, a group member sent her a necklace. She still wears it when she feels in need of a little extra support. Within the group, we have also seen moms reach out for and receive financial support. This tangible support or sharing "goods and services offline" (p. 513) feels unique to this group, something we have not seen elsewhere.

This group has offered the opportunity for Emily to share her experiences to help others. Although Kopacz's research solely looked at the content of original posts, offering support is a theme reflective of Emily's experience participating in the group. As her life has stabilized in both career and parenting, she has had the emotional and mental space to transition more into offering support, which has been rewarding and reminds Emily of how far she has come. This is significant given that sometimes her experience as a single mom in academia feels stuck, and she forgets that she has grown, both personally and professionally. Because the FB group for single parents in academia is open to moms in all academic specialties, support can be both specific and broad. As someone who has expertise in counseling with young people, Emily feels efficacious in her ability to offer specific, evidence-based advice for folks seeking parenting support. As single moms in academia, we have limited time, energy, and emotional resources and having a community of experts in areas where we have no experience has been interesting and beneficial. This reciprocity is a key element of the group and can help members feel supported and useful.

Emotional support can be seen in “posts [that serve] the functions of uplifting, empowering, or motivating fellow members, as well as improving their self-perceptions” (Kopacz, 2021, p. 513). For example, Emily has found the group to be a space where she can say things she cannot say anywhere else. She has posted to express her exasperation with things great and small. One of the most difficult things for Emily in her experience was living under a microscope. Anything she said, did, implied, and so on could be generalized to her character or parenting even if it was clearly said in anger or jest. Within the group, she has been able to get help with how to say things and what not to say. She has also expressed her pride in success. In reviewing her posts, Emily found one for the first time she pulled off Christmas with her children solo. She knew that would be understood within the group and found it a safe space to celebrate her success, in addition to the frustrations she has expressed over the years.

Alex found group members offering emotional support during a distinct moment when she was feeling particularly overwhelmed. She hadn’t been sleeping well and was struggling to complete the work of two courses while teaching another two; she felt completely exhausted. Her daughter was having a tantrum. She had taken all of her stuffed animals, blankets, and pillows, and thrown them across the living room, and Alex started to cry. There was no place for Alex to privately express her emotions; she and her daughter lived in a one-bedroom apartment, maybe 500 square feet. Alex’s daughter came up to her and said, “I wish I could have a new mommy, one who doesn’t cry in my face.” This gutted Alex, but she also knew she needed to be there for her daughter, so she picked up a plastic yellow pony that had landed nearby and began to talk to her daughter about how she Alex was feeling, as the pony. When Alex shared this experience with the Facebook group hours later after her daughter was asleep, words of comfort and support poured in. The group members reassured Alex that she was doing an incredible job, that she had not failed her daughter, and that her ability to be there for her in that moment was an admirable accomplishment. This type of support couldn't come from anyone else; no one else quite understands the emotional, mental, and physical work it takes to carry through those moments.

Requesting Support

Of course, the main purpose this group has served for us is as a source of support [as in "requesting support" (Kopacz, 2021, p. 514)]. When Emily first joined the group, she did not have a legal agreement with her ex and was experiencing immense trauma within the court system. She had to move to take an academic job 3 hours away in a different state when there were none in her immediate area. The narrative outside of academia is often that one should just get a job where one's children are, end of story. Within the group, Emily found that people understood what she had to do. They really understood the narrative that women should be both endlessly self-sacrificing in their roles as mothers, as well as dedicated and successful in their careers, and they knew its effects not just academically, but personally. They also knew the financial pressures Emily was under, with legal expenses that far outpaced her single mother income. They knew what it was like to live in fear of losing the court case of your life while trying to build a career in a patriarchal system that values the sacrificing of all other roles to put academia first and is designed for an "ideal worker" (Armenti, 2004; Princteon Theological Seminary, 2019). At that time, Emily needed to feel seen, understood, and supported, and this group served that exact purpose. Although Emily has great friends outside of this group, ones who happily give advice when needed, she does not have to contextualize her concerns within the group in the same way. Though Emily's need for this type of support has waned, she is still able to seek support for what it is like to balance single parenthood with the demands of an academic career and reach out when issues do come up.

Unique to this group is the immensely valuable ability to seek professional support. The typical academic can do a nationwide (maybe even worldwide) search for a job. They may have the desire to narrow that search, of course, but most academic job searchers cast a wide net. A partnered academic likely knows there is backup when their kid is sick and does not have to try to get a feel for the culture around work obligations and kids. Only a single mom in academia knows what it feels like to seek a job that is a good career move and provides flexibility to be a mom. She knows what it is like to be location bound due to legal custody agreements. She knows how hard it is to find a job locally or an online only job.

For example, when Alex was early in her graduate career, she was preparing for what her life might look like after she finished her PhD—what does an academic job search look like for someone who is divorced with 50/50 custody? Like Emily, Alex was able to learn from other women's experiences and benefited from those like her who responded to her requests for support from their own experience and expertise. She saw different possibilities and was able to begin preparing herself for what was feasible given her constraints. No one else in Alex's graduate program could offer this, as they had all participated in the traditional academic search, one where people often apply to hundreds of jobs across the country, hoping to land one, coveted tenure-track position. While peers in Alex's program scoffed at the visiting instructor positions she shared in jobseeker conversations, Alex felt reassured knowing that even though she may have been alone in that physical space, she was not alone as a single mom.

Although Emily came to the group seeking a perspective that was not directly linked to the members' single mother experiences, it was no less important that their perspective was uniquely influenced by that identity. During her last job interview process, Emily came to the group seeking ideas for engagement in teaching people on Zoom. She received several suggestions that spurred her creativity and helped her feel more confident going into the interview. While Emily could seek this advice elsewhere, she has friends and colleagues throughout academia, no one in those circles knows what it feels like to be at the intersection of single mom and academic. Being seen for the whole of that identity as a single mom in academia feels important in seeking advice, even when the advice sought is strictly academic in nature. Unlike connections in general academia, these group members know how much more is riding on a job interview simply because there is less relocation flexibility. They know the unique ways a single mom identity can influence even the most seemingly unrelated situation. This is a perspective that can be found only in this group.

Although it is not perfect, like any group there is conflict when people misunderstand each other and we wish that the group was more culturally representative of our society, this group has served an essential part of creating a system of well-being. Finding divorced friends and single parent friends is challenging. Being a member of this group has reduced feelings of isolation and depathologized our experiences in ways that no other system of support has. One might think that Facebook or other online groups are less connected, less "real," or unsafe spaces, but that has not been my experience. This group has served an essential role in our ability to do our life with a modicum of success, and we could not have found that elsewhere.

We have benefitted from the collegiality, friendliness, and sense of community ("we are in this together") in the group. The things we read there make us feel normal. But unlike some places for support seeking on the internet, posts are not just about information seeking. Sometimes they are just about building community and connecting. As it is often the only place some of us feel safe to really express what is happening for us, this sense of gratitude is occasionally expressed in original posts. Sometimes new members are welcomed with promises of support and appreciative posts regarding the group. This has made us feel pride in being a part of the group and part of creating the special support network within it. As many of us fight against negative perceptions based on our single mother identity, this experience feels affirming of our humanity.

The Limitations of a Digital Village

The connections that the single parents in academia group made possible are why Alex stayed for so long. There were many moments when she contemplated leaving because she felt like her mental and emotional health were suffering due to her continued use of the site. She stayed because of the people, particularly the single moms in academia group, as Siva Vaidhyanathan (2018) writes, "The value [of Facebook] is in the other people. We find it hard to imagine living in a Facebook-free world because we mostly enjoy our frequent, easy, cost-free contact …" (p. 19). Alex knew if she left Facebook, she would not find a village like this group anywhere else; she would never find such a substantial group of single moms in academia in a single space again. When she left and chose to practice "media refusal" (Portwood-Stacer, 2012, p. 1042), she found out she was right.[3]

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[3] While Alex left Facebook for reasons tied to her mental and emotional health, she also left because of Facebook's surveillance, as well as how the site passively profits from consumers' use (see *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* by Jenny Odell, 2019).

Once outside of Facebook, Alex began working to try and build her own support network, which was a substantial challenge. Building and maintaining connections on Facebook were easier, as research has shown "social network sites might help individuals maintain weak or strong ties that would otherwise become extinguished due to an absence of offline interactions … social network sites allow users to maintain large networks of connections … and provide a medium through which support can be sought and provided" (Verduyn et al., 2017, p. 288). Outside of Facebook, there was no network of connection that compared to what Alex had within it, and she lacked the time and energy to build what she had found. She was dealing with the "social costs to opting out of Facebook membership" and learning that while "there are other social media services, none of them have the reach, the features, and, most important, the gravity of Facebook" (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 204). Leaving the group created a gap in her life that Alex struggled to fill and speaks to the shortcomings of institutional support systems and structures in creating a village for single moms beyond social media spaces. It also illustrates the invisible labor single moms do to survive within a space, higher education, not designed with them in mind.

The digital village for single moms in academia that Facebook provides is unparalleled. There is no other space where single moms who share these experiences from across the world can connect 24/7, 365. However, when the digital village is housed in an online space, specifically Facebook, there are limitations. Housing the support on this site inevitably leads to exclusions, as evidenced not only in Alex's experience, but also the experiences of two other single moms in academia who participated in Alex's study—Tricia and Danielle.[4] These two women's experiences push us to consider who is excluded when supports are stored in a single online platform.

Tricia is a divorced single mom with primary custody of her son; she is also an Army Veteran and a former PhD student. About three years ago, Tricia went on medical leave due to a head injury. She was in her bedroom dancing to music, and she bent over to pet her dog. When Tricia stood back up, she hit her head on the corner of her bed. This 10-s moment changed her life. As a result of the head injury, Tricia has had photophobia, screen intolerance, and some inflammation on the left side of her head for years. She can no longer look at screens. She can't email or send text messages without pain. Facebook is out of the question. While Tricia had been actively involved at her graduate institution—she had been a member of the student senate, the provost knew her by name, and she had received numerous awards for her academic accomplishments—once her head injury happened, she had to go on medical leave. She has yet to return to graduate school. Without being able to regularly participate in digital spaces, Tricia has become increasingly alone. She described feeling like "a ghost in the background" who wants "acknowledgement I still exist."

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[4] These names are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity of research participants in accordance with IRB guidelines.

As the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, digital spaces can be an invaluable source of connection. Video chats, text messaging, emails, and social media platforms become ways to feel close to others, to continue to see what's going on in their lives, despite isolation. For people like Tricia, these spaces are inaccessible. While individuals who experience traumatic brain injuries, like concussions, often recover in less than a month, "10–15% have post-concussion syndrome, where symptoms can persist for months to years" (Mansur et al., 2018, p. 1886). In other words, Tricia is not alone in her inability to access online spaces, to participate in digital villages like the single parents in academia group, even though such a group would inevitably be an essential means of support, especially in moments of loneliness and isolation like what she experienced after her head injury.

Unlike Tricia, Danielle's decision to leave Facebook is based on personal choice and her emotional well-being. Danielle is a single mom participant in Alex's study who was never in the FB group for single moms in academia, but whose experience illustrates how housing support groups in online spaces limit who has access. At the time of Alex's study, Danielle was working full-time as a paralegal and attending college to receive her bachelor's degree; her son, Logan,[5] was a young teenager. Danielle is Logan's primary parent; his dad has not been involved since Logan was a year old. However, that changed when Logan's dad reached out to Danielle through Facebook.

Danielle had made a public post about how Father's Day is about honoring the people in our lives who are parents, whether they're grandpas, stepparents, or friends. Logan's dad saw this and sent Danielle a message thanking her for not bashing him, while also reassuring her that he didn't want to come back into Logan's life. Despite this, Logan's dad began reaching out weekly, messaging Danielle saying, "Please tell Logan I love him and miss him before school." As Danielle tried to assert boundaries to protect her son, letting Logan's dad know she would not relay these messages, that it wasn't appropriate, Logan's dad started to offer explanations for his seemingly sudden gesture, while also commenting on the personal relationship he and Danielle used to share. This behavior mirrored old patterns, when he had reached out to Danielle years before to try and get back together with her, and never once asked about Logan. Danielle ultimately cut off all communication with him, making clear that the only way he was to communicate with her was about Logan.

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[5] This name is a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of Danielle's son.

Due to this interaction, Danielle deactivated all social media, including Facebook, as she put it, "I needed a break from everything … I just had to stop." At a moment when Danielle could have benefited from the mental and emotional support of others who may have been through similar experiences, she was left to work through this on her own. When Danielle described navigating this situation and writing to Logan's dad, she said, "It's hard, but I've been doing it for so long on my own." In other words, Danielle has figured out how to navigate these types of experiences on her own, in part because developing and accessing a network of support takes time, trust, and work. Danielle's decision to deactivate her Facebook due to the interaction with her son's dad means that a digital village in that social media space is unavailable.

Conclusion

When single moms cannot form support networks within social media spaces, they are forced to turn elsewhere. In Alex's experience, she developed a network from people in her life. She found a supportive therapist who was willing to work with her financial limitations so that she could access mental health care; she connected with a friend's mom, a retired family court judge, who was available to answer legal questions when she had them; she began talking with friends who grew up with divorced parents to learn more about their experiences, and she found a partner who provides substantial mental and emotional support. She also was able to maintain a few connections with single moms she met through the Facebook group, as well as strengthen connections with a few women from her academic institutions who are single moms.

Building this network has taken years, and it still has limitations. None of the people in her support network have a shared embodied experience or material reality. Because many are also single moms or do not live close by, the interactions are often intermittent and irregular. There is not one single space Alex can look to when it comes to asking questions, sharing concerns, and/or offering advice. She has yet to find or create something similar to the space on Facebook and often finds herself thinking about the group and the women who helped carry her through an incredibly difficult time in her life.

Creating an alternative to the digital villages for single moms requires expertise and knowledge about digital spaces and their inner workings that we have limited familiarity with. As authors who specialize in Rhetoric and Composition and Counseling, we cannot speak to the social media platforms and community building resources that exist online. And it's unlikely that the utopian space we imagine even exists. Ideally, a support space for single moms would be a central location where single moms could share their questions, concerns, and stories with confidentiality, where they could connect without their data being mined or their online activity becoming a source of profit; it would be a space where the creators are not manipulating the platform to encourage prolonged use, where topics can be organized and easily accessed, where users can react to posts even if they can't type a comment, a space where those who cannot use a computer still have a way to enter. Delgado Community College in Louisiana has a general app for its community members, but within the app there is a channel specifically for single moms where they can connect with one another. While this space excludes single moms like Tricia and only allows participants from within the university, it is a starting point for an alternative digital space where single moms can connect with one another that is supported by the institution (C. N. Mason et al., 2020).

In the absence of an ideal digital space, colleges and universities could offer a physical one. Some colleges and universities offer student parent support centers, like University of California, Berkeley, University of Minnesota, Michigan State University, The University of Pennsylvania, and Oregon State University. While these spaces often prioritize support for student parents, they could also provide support to parents more broadly. For example, The University of Pennsylvania has a family center that offers family meet-ups, weekly playdates, and online parent check-ins, among other types of support that not only help connect parents with one another, but also create space for parents of various identities, acknowledging the unique experiences of individuals within the collective center (Family Resource Center at University of Pennsylvania, 2021). Centers like this could help begin to bridge the gap for those who cannot create digital villages, and if possible, these centers could collaborate with one another to build a larger network of support.

Digital spaces are an invaluable source of support for single moms in academia, but they are limited in their reach and accessibility. Creating alternative support networks outside of social media, in particular, can open the possibilities for more single moms to feel a sense of community in an environment where they're often feeling incredibly alone. This community is essential not only for the retention of single moms in academia but also for their mental, emotional, and overall well-being.

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PART II

Connection and Support

Dealing with Death in Academia, or when 11,000 Mamas* Had my Back

Kelly O. Secovnie

"You have fourteen days of bereavement leave for the death of your spouse," I hear from the lips of my Department Chair. I am numb and don't fully register the meaning of these words. My husband, Tony, died on December 4, 2016, a Sunday morning. Apparently, I am expected to return to work as usual two weeks later. As an Assistant Professor recently awarded tenure, I was "lucky" that he died in early December, and my bereavement leave took me to the end of the fall semester, with no teaching duties again until the end of January. But even as the blinding light of the shock of his sudden death slowly faded into a foggy, enveloping gray,

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The use of the asterisk with the term "Mamas" follows the online community's efforts to expand the term "mama" to be more inclusive of a variety of genders and caregivers.

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those four sections of Composition I'd need to teach in a few weeks came into sharp, piercing focus.

I'd managed, with the help of my siblings and best friend, to put together a funeral service in five days, to attend to my two toddlers' needs, and to plow through the relentless and painful phone calls that ensue upon the death of a spouse. The challenge of the spring looming over me, coupled with the fact that the kids and I could not afford to stay in our home and would need to find a place closer to my job to make this new life remotely manageable, impossible to get my head around. I turned to my Department Chair for help, but was told there was no option to make the spring semester load lighter other than unpaid leave. HR told me that I would lose our health insurance if I exercised this option. I was already feeling financially fragile after losing my husband's paycheck from his job as an IT manager at a major hospital system. Paying for health insurance without either his income or mine seemed like no option at all.

As the first person in my family to complete a Bachelor's degree (no less a Master's and PhD), I did not have family to ask for career advice, and none of my colleagues had ever been in my unique situation: widowed with two small children. Meeting others widowed at age 41 with two young kids would come later through widow support groups and group therapy, but at two weeks out these were not yet a part of my reality.

Before Tony died and out of sheer, sleepless misery, I had joined a parenting group targeted to academics where I made my first post in August of 2016 asking for help for my 4-year old's sleep woes—a pretty typical query in a group of that sort. I found empathetic and experienced members who gave me ideas for how to help us all get more sleep. I thought, maybe I could turn to them again. A graduate school friend who had originally invited me to the group had posted on my behalf the day after Tony died, letting members know of my loss, so some knew of my situation already.

> Ten days after Tony died, I posted this to the group:
>
> "Hi Mamas,
>
> I am the member whose husband died suddenly about a week and a half ago at age 43. First, let me thank all of you for your support, when [name redacted] posted on my behalf. It means so much to feel that I have a community here, even though I've only been a member for a short time. As you all give good advice time after time, I have a dilemma to present. I'd love to hear you weigh in. Here goes:

> When Tony died, I got 14 days of emergency/bereavement leave, which took me to the end of the fall semester, luckily. So, January is set. The problem is, with two kids, ages almost 2 and 4.5, I don't feel that I can go back to full-time teaching next semester. I teach at [name redacted] at a community college (so, high teaching load). I just got tenure this semester (thank Science) and I was planning on applying for sabbatical next semester (which would run for the 2017–2018 AY). I have a 1.5 hour commute each way on public transit, and I have to be on campus at least three days a week. This set up only worked because my husband worked in [name redacted] about a half hour from daycare and could drive to get the kids at a moment's notice. My nearest family member is 1.25 hours away by car. And, my income is dropping significantly (my husband made about 1.5 times what I did—we are in a high cost of living area).
>
> My instinct says to take the semester off unpaid (no paid option is available). This would give me time to probably sell the house and get us set up in a new place (my son starts kindergarten in the fall of 2017) that we can afford, and it would allow me to be much more available to my kids' needs as they grieve the loss of their father, [sic.] but would also cut significantly into the limited life insurance my husband had.
>
> I will start getting social security benefits on behalf of the kids (not sure how much yet), so I'll have some money coming in, but not much, from what I understand. Anyone experienced a similar dilemma? I'm a bit afraid taking leave might jeopardize my chances at sabbatical that next semester, as well. Help give me some insight, mamas!
>
> UPDATE: I was not looking for funds (feel very awkward about it, actually), but, since many of you have asked, my best friend did set up a gofundme for me and the kids. It's here: [website redacted]".

While I hoped that a few people might weigh in with ideas, I had no idea the depths of compassion I would find. The support poured in, with the post garnering 189 comments (some of which were my own responses to ideas) from mamas near and far. Among the expressions of sympathy and generous donations, I found the advice I was looking for from several members of my larger university system (not my individual college) who were also members of my union. They told me that our union had negotiated a contingency wherein faculty could delay some teaching hours if they "made them up" sometime in the three years after the semester they reduced their hours. This meant, if approved, I could keep my job and benefits, teaching two courses instead of four. After making a call to my union representative, I requested this solution from my Chair, who eventually approved it. The fog began to lift and a vision of my near future became clearer.

Using the information and support gleaned from my informal network, I was able to teach two online courses, only traveling to campus one day a week. I used that extra time to pack up, repair and update, stage, and sell my home. I cared for my kids the best I could (I recall an even more sleep-deprived post about two months post-death, where I simply asked for words of support after a particularly grueling night on my own with wakeful toddlers, where those same members took time to offer words of encouragement and advice and support, leaving me with 289 comments). In addition to those tasks, I managed to find a new, smaller apartment in the city with a 45-minute commute, next door to the elementary school my kids would later attend.

I moved with my now smaller family in May of 2017. I now think I still hadn't really registered the death of my husband, a man I met as a child—I was 16 and he was 18—and had known for more of my life than not. We'd been friends for 10 years, partnered for 15 years, seven of which we spent married. With him, I'd grown into an adult. He knew me as a teenager, a young adult pursuing her education, a partner, a newly minted Assistant Professor, a wife, a parent, and now his widow. Reckoning with the impact of those losses is still, five years out, part of my every day. Yet, looking back, I am proud of the life I've been able to build out of the pieces with which I was left.

While I credit most of these accomplishments to the incredible support of my siblings and friends, all of whom held and hold me and my babies up through every storm, I also know I would not be in the place I am without the support of 11,000 mamas* who had my back. To them I owe much of my ability to function in those first harrowing six months, and they remain a touchstone in each new phase of my life as an only parent and academic.

The Face(book) of Academic Motherhood: Online Communities Respond to the Traumatic and the Mundane

Laura Quaynor and Agata Szczeszak-Brewer

For mothers of young children in the U.S., the COVID-19 pandemic exposed frail in-person social and childcare supports, with multiple impacts, such as reductions to work hours four to five times higher than for fathers of young children (Collins et al., 2021). In 2020 and 2021, many mothers in the U.S. had no subsidized childcare, little in-person contact outside of their immediate families, and diminishing societal resource commitments to raising the next generation (Green & O'Reilly, 2021).

This chapter uses the genre of flash creative nonfiction to examine the experience of mothering young children and working as an academic at the intersection of the pandemic and political unrest, providing two vignettes illustrating ways that online communities organized around

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motherhood intersect with women's daily lives, creating a group of co-mothers across time and space. The two mother authors of this chapter have over a decade of experience mothering and participating in online groups. The chapter draws from narrative inquiry theory (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), which focuses on using narratives to explore lived experiences, with a recognition of the temporality, sociality, and place-based nature of people and events (Clandinin et al., 2007). Here, we use stories of lived experiences to understand the phenomenon of motherhood together, online, amidst social realities in the U.S.

Below are two flash creative nonfiction essays, followed by authors' responses to each other's pieces and a reflection on key issues highlighted by the pieces. Flash creative nonfiction is a genre of creative writing in between the poem and the short story, in which a brief vignette illustrates a moment or set of moments in the life of an individual or a group (Saylors et al., 2014). As one of the authors is a professor of English and the other a professor of education, we offer elements of both art (flash creative nonfiction) and social sciences in this piece.

Both writers are white, doctoral degree earners, mothers of multiple children, and geographically located in the Midwestern area of the U.S. Our lived experiences are limited to our own social location related to race, class, geography, gender, and other relevant characteristics. The chapter includes a delineation of these constraints and considerations for mothers engaging in online communities and those who hope to support mothers and children.

Coup Mothers

There is a black-and-white photo of me in front of a chalkboard with Mother's handwriting: *Agata ma 3 lata*. Agata is 3 years old. I am holding a tulip and smiling mischievously, two blond ponytails curving away from my face like parentheses. Grandpa is heating up savory bigos in Mother's kitchen, a stew made from dried mushrooms we all collected in Poland's thick forests in the fall to survive harsh winters. Grandpa is not in the photo, but the earthy smell of mushrooms tickles my nostrils when I look at the black-and-white snapshot of my childhood.

Four days after my third birthday, Mother and I will turn on the TV in the morning, expecting the *Teleranek* jingle ending with a shrill cock-a-doodle-doo, the sound of a weekend children's show in most Polish homes in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead of a running rooster on the screen there is a somber man dressed in a military uniform. I hear the general say, “How long will a hand extended for accord meet a fist?” He wears large glasses on his balding head. He looks like a penguin, his beak-like mouth enunciating words I do not understand. I move my gaze to Mother, whose whole body is listening, every neuron trained on the man behind the glass separating his stark office from our sunlit living room. “I declare that today, the army council of national salvation has been constituted. The council of state, obeying the constitution, declared a state of war at midnight on the territory of Poland.”

“*Stan wojenny*,” Mother whispers. Martial Law. Minutes later, I hear a tsssssk from the kitchen as Mother opens her first beer bottle of the day.

* * *

Almost forty years later, in rural Indiana, I sit in my Subaru with my tween son, idling in a dark alley between a red-bricked church and a wooden fence. I am waiting for my daughter to be dismissed from daycare, but I cannot turn away from the tiny screen of my iPhone where the U.S. coup of January 6th, 2021, is broadcast live. As the mostly white, red-hatted supporters of a petulant businessman-turned-autocrat storm the Capitol, I ask: What kind of a mother will I be to my children? What do I do now? How do I protect them? How do I protect myself?

The phone’s flimsy dust-pink protective case feels wet in my hand. I turn around. My tween is in the backseat, quiet and open-mouthed. A child of academics surrounded by Confederate-flag-flying neighbors, he already knows that this moment will weigh heavily on his family. I shut my phone.

“We should listen to music,” I say in Polish.

“Mama, what’s going on?” My son’s Polish is already rusty—no trips to Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic—so he speaks English.

“Some people don’t want to relinquish power. There are adults out there who behave like little children who do not want to share their toy truck.” Only the consequences of their actions are more dangerous than a playground skirmish, I want to add. Instead, I ask him not to talk about the news to his three-year-old sister.

At home, after I put my kids to bed, I open a Stella and all of a sudden the tssssssk makes me shudder. I drink half the beer and pour the rest over the unwashed dishes in the sink. I click on the blue square with a white “f” on my iPhone and go straight to the group of academic mamas with kids my daughter's age. They are already talking about the coup and the impact it will have on their children, some of whom are Black and Brown, some of whom are raised in single-sex or immigrant households, some of whom are surrounded, like my own kids, by people flying "Fuck Biden" signs from their trucks.

* * *

In front of my children, I keep quiet. I tell my older one that we are prepared for any emergency and that he is safe in the middle of Indiana cornfields. He says, "But you have that sign in front of the house, the one that says *No matter where you're from, we're glad you're our neighbor.*" At 11, he already knows that kindness is a political statement that can get you in trouble.

When I say we are prepared, I am telling the truth. Despite my husband's frequent side-eyes and raised eyebrows, I have stocked our basement with rice, beans, freeze-dried veggies, powdered milk, SPAM, peanut butter, flashlights, AA batteries, handwarmers, water filters, sleeping bags, a tent, a portable stove, and enough gasoline to get our car to the Canadian border. He indulges my preparations but does not fully understand my anxiety. It is in the tiny white "f" in a blue square that I find empathy, a space to vent, a forum to ask practical questions, a community that comes together to say: You are not alone. Your fears are valid.

* * *

I was born in the People's Republic of Poland when the Communist regime was waning but desperate to hold on to its totalitarian power. My family survived the hunger of two World Wars and post-war totalitarian rule, including Stalin's terror. I was three when Martial Law was declared and tanks rolled out into our streets, and I was eleven when the regime fell. My childhood was dust on empty shelves in grocery shops, queues for butter and meat in frost-sprinkled mornings, drunks sleeping in staircases of our cement Stalinist-style tower blocks, and civilians disappearing from our streets into unmarked vans. I do not remember ever seeing tanks. I do not remember ever seeing anyone I know disappear during Martial Law. I do remember, though, the fear in Mother's eyes and her hasty burning of papers in our kitchen sink in December 1981. I also remember feeling that

I alone should protect my toddler brother since Mother was too far gone into the cocoon of booze and drugs. Father was mostly absent.

Mothering was what I did most of my childhood—getting my toddler brother dressed and reading books to him, helping him with elementary-school homework and scavenging for food, wiping his bloody nose when he got into fights as he got older. I also mothered Mother, as I begged her to eat something, lifted her up from a vomit-covered linoleum floor, and woke her up in the morning so she could go to work.

These are my earliest memories of Mother: The penguin man in a military uniform. The sun illuminating her petrified face. Then the tssssssk of the beer bottle cap. Her bleary eyes. Her slurred speech. The helplessness of what I now know was several disasters converging on her at the same time: Martial Law. Empty shelves in grocery stores. Two kids. An unfaithful husband. Separation. Divorce.

She is fear and anger, sometimes simmering just under the surface and visible only as her pulsating cheekbones and narrowed eyes, heard only in her curt *tak* and *nie*, the yeses and nos spat through clenched teeth, and sometimes in fire power exploding from a large-caliber tank gun with gyroscopic precision, the detonation precipitated by alcohol withdrawal. She is a shard of glass aimed at my chest. She is a sixty-proof breath and slurred consonants when ethanol mollifies her fury. She is a sleeping beauty on musty bedsheets or on the red carpet where she passes out.

But she is also a woman who sews a gorgeous green gown for my ballroom dancing tournaments, the steady chucka chucka chucka of the sewing machine needle, and the fluid motions of her foot as she presses the pedal and stretches the bottle-green fabric. She is the skilled pianist swaying her body to *Für Elise*. She is a woman who nurses dogs, cats, and rats back to health in our drafty two-bedroom apartment. She is a reader of thrillers and biographies—at least until pills and vodka turn her brain to mush and she can no longer focus on the storyline.

* * *

So how do I mother my children? How do I protect them as the world around us seems to crumble?

By the time my daughter is born, Mother is no longer alive. Not that she'd offer much comfort to me anyway. Before her death, I would call her from across the Atlantic only to hear her slurred S's and Z's, the clinking of glass, the hum of a Polish movie in the background. When my daughter cries and I don't know what to do, I cannot call Mother. Instead, I search for the voices of other academic mothers, voices I mostly imagine because most of our conversations happen within the glow of my iPhone, on Facebook threads.

Under one of the posts ("WTF? The Capitol has been breached!"), someone whose family is probably in greater danger than mine—she's a woman of color in a same-sex partnership—tags me in a comment: "please take care of yourself and be safe in Indiana." Another woman asks if I am safe. Another offers help. They have read my posts about automatic gun practice in my neighborhood, the sea of MAGA hats in Walmart, the death threats I received before a Black Lives Matter (BLM) march. As I coordinate an emergency plan with a colleague who is one of few Black residents of our town, our Facebook thread changes from the tone of concern and disbelief to anger. "Can you imagine if these were BLM protesters?" "The 'blue lives matter' crowd attacking the police and legislators." "Yeah this is some fragile white supremacist bullshit." A Black mama says, "I don't know what to do with my emotions." Another: "I'm out of all coping skills, good or otherwise." And another: "I have so much rage going in so many directions right now." And then: "I'm having this really weird, kind of numb reaction to what happened here. Like my brain won't let me process it. I'm thinking this might be a protective mechanism driven by fear but it's creeping me out. Are you experiencing anything like this?" Yes, yes, yes. Stay safe. Keep your kids close. We will help each other.

A friend from the Caribbean says: "I told my husband this was coming." In fact, a lot of the non-US-born mamas as well as mamas of color confirm that this coup is not a surprise, that they have anticipated violence, that they have been reading the signs since 2016. I respond: "I told mine, too. He dismissed it as my irrational PTSD-caused fear." I add: "I feel conflicted between wanting to numb myself with alcohol and staying sober to be able to make decisions if we have to move at night. I have a feeling tomorrow will actually be worse, at least in Indiana. I want to keep my kids home, but my husband disagrees." A slew of responses follows. You are not being irrational, they say. Whatever keeps your children safe, they say. Keep us posted, they say. Stay safe.

The next morning, we share our decisions about daycare. "I think I have a rage hangover. I am just really fucking cranky today," one mama says. This is exactly how I feel. The headache and anxiety cannot be from the half Stella I had the day before. I hug my children and tell them about our safety plan in case anything happens close to home. I send them to school because I want them to continue with their routine. I tell them that mama has it all planned out, that they are safe, that we will protect them. My three-year-old only half-listens because her Elsa doll lost a tiny shoe. My tween nods, pulls his mask up, and hops out of the car. Behind us in the school drop-off is a van. Inside the van, a white woman and a MAGA hat on the dashboard.

* * *

Years after the Martial Law in Poland, one of the creators of the children's show—the one we didn't see that day the general appeared on our TVs—was asked what Polish children missed that day when the show did not air. He said that the leading topic of that day was "Anything can happen on the 13th," and that it was a compilation of videos about paranormal activities.

Anything could have happened at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021. Anything could have happened on January 20th. Anything could still happen in four years, or eight, even if most people around me treat my cautiously mumbled fears about political violence with polite condescension. I am a white immigrant who can pass in the street until I open my mouth and my Polish accent betrays my roots and someone inevitably asks, "When are you going back home?" even though my two U.S.-born children are with me, even though in my safe box at home are two valid passports: a wine-red Polish one and a navy-colored American one.

Where do I turn when fear floods my brain? Who do I ask for advice when my toddler hasn't pooped for six days and my tween picks at his scabs and I can barely hold it together as a wave of fascism sweeps through my adopted country? The academic mamas' group has over 500 members, though most of them don't post regularly. The core group that is active has a bond I never imagined possible for an online assembly of people from around the world. After all, there are only two things that bond us together: We are mothers, and we work in academia. These two things define our identities in ways that are inseparable from each other. What makes this particular group work, among a sea of others I belong to, where judgment and bickering define interactions? Kindness, empathy, and generosity. I am aware that our sense of belonging varies, that white mamas there—myself included—should be mindful at all times of our narrow perspectives and gaps in understanding. In the absence of real-life role models, however, I find mine in this virtual community. The girl who watched her mother fall on the kitchen linoleum face down in spilled liquor as men in uniforms warmed their hands around trash can fires outside the deserted city and neighbors nervously peeked through their drawn curtains to see whether it was safe to stand in line for bread and toothpaste, I turn to people I have never seen in the flesh, to words of wisdom and comfort on a glowing rectangle of my phone.

Just like life-giving fungi providing nutrients to plants, helping them communicate with each other, my network of academic mothers gives me life when I'm numb, reaches out and away, merging, fusing, seeking, working in unison. Our underground network of help makes me thrive among rot and decay, helps me survive the mundane and the traumatic, provides nourishment for my precarious ecosystem.

Love in the Time of Laundry

Cool steel, gleaming white—the new machine was delivered yesterday.

The curved plastic reflects my face, bent and elongated. Round and dark, framed in white ceramic, mimicking an astronaut's helmet. Or a mid-twentieth-century diver's hat, like the one my grandfather wore in 1944 when he detonated underwater bombs in Le Havre. The circular, reflective portal suggests a meeting of two worlds: human and space, water and air, me and my phone, my imagination and the laundry.

The tile is cold under my feet—I don't like socks or slippers unless there is snow on the ground outside. Bending down, I open the washing machine door, then the dryer. They open inwards, so that they block each other. Why did we never fix that?

Reaching into the darkness of the washing machine, I feel wet clothes in unidentifiable shapes of undistinguishable colors. I move them from the washer to the dryer. Add a dryer sheet—the one that some people say causes cancer. I close each door, slam them, really. Press the "on" button, then the "play" button on the machines. There is a trill and then a deep bass rhythm as they churn. I barely stop to notice the sound, as my body is already off to the next meeting, grading the next paper.

Looking back at the washing machine, its door curved, I fantasize for a moment about a portal, one through which I see another woman's home. The image comes in reverse, and I see her closing the laundry machine, starting it as a child runs by, then going to the sink full of dishes. She looks at the sink with frustration, and turns away, walks by a child watching TV, and opens her laptop to grade student papers. In my fantasy, I crawl through the machine door to her house, wash her dishes, joke with her children, and then shimmy back into my house, the only telltale sign an extra tear on my yoga pants.

As I walk past the coffee table, on the way back to my office, I pass by a magazine with a cover story detailing how a clothing magnate (some of whose clothes are in the machine) gave a lot of his money to a child predator in a scandal that ended in social and physical ruin.

Reaching into my pockets—and I do always wear yoga pants with pockets—I open up my phone—another curved portal. I hit the “f” button in the search window and press the blue square that appears. Clicking on the group full of over 500 mothers who are also academics who have children born in the same year, I climb through a portal to read, smile, and take in images as I walk back to my computer.

Worried about the Delta variant? Need a sex ed book for a kindergartener? Trying to assess the relative safety of teaching undergraduates during COVID in a larger classroom? Should you use a HEPA filter? What do you do when a student refuses to wear a mask? When is it time to leave your job, your marriage, your home? Who will be there when you do?

We will, says this group. We are here to answer these questions, imperfectly and with an attitude. We are here to say: You are okay. You make sense. Yes, you have seven pairs of shoes to return to Amazon that have been sitting in the corner for three weeks, after which the return window will finish. Yes, you can’t possibly know your child’s current shoe size because you are trying to buy new shoes in a pandemic while parenting at least one toddler.

Yes, women and men have died and there are riots in your city and you are sad and terrified and angry at the world in which you have brought children into, yet you just got a publication accepted so you are also thrilled.

Yes, you moved into your house three years ago and have not hung a single picture. Here are 15 different examples of how other people put pictures up on their walls.

Good morning! Have you exercised yet? What are your goals to be healthy today, an exercise science professor mom asks, for those of us who have opted into her accountability group. Breathe, move, eat good things, think good thoughts, we say. Do what we can, with others doing what they can, while there is good news (a pandemic vaccine has been approved by the government!) and bad news (our children are not old enough for the vaccine; a country is falling into the hands of a terrorist group; what will they do; will there be soccer matches or beheadings in the stadiums?).

Sometimes we talk about laundry, too.

When we talk about laundry, we are talking about burnout: *One professor says she is on the "hot mess express" because of all the STUFF in her house that is there to organize—paper piles to categorize, old toys to throw out, laundry piles—and she cannot ignore these things to work.*

When we talk about laundry, we are talking about partnership: *That tricky stain to get rid of, resentment, seethes out of posts about partners who have child-free time or child-rearing time and do not do laundry. "Mount laundromanjaro" and "being up to my neck in laundry" are phrases seen in these posts.*

When we talk about laundry, we are talking about domestic help: *Hiring nannies and babysitters and gauging their level of engagement with these precious people to us and deciding whether $21/hour is enough to expect someone to do laundry and meal prep as well as childcare. In these posts we also give ourselves permission to get help with kids' laundry.*

When we talk about laundry, we are talking about the second shift: *On our lunch break, on our weekends, on our vacation, when we get home from work, we are most certainly doing laundry.*

Like motherhood, laundry holds hidden dangers. Across the U.S., 15,500 clothes dryer fires occur annually, causing 10 deaths, 310 injuries, and $84 million in property damage each year. From what? Clutter around the dryer, rubber in the washing machine, very wet clothes in the dryer—all things that happen on a regular basis in my house.

I only found our dryer vent because there were yellow jackets on the deck. I like to eat outside in the summer, especially because there is less to clean up. This summer, the yellow jackets kept messing with our summertime picnics, buzzing around when we were trying to eat. And they're fierce, those yellowjackets—two of my four children had yellow jacket stings at any given moment. From summer camp, not home, but the point holds—everyone was afraid of them. Hoping to find their nest so we could have a late August picnic, I went under the deck, scanning the crevices. No yellow jacket nest, but a dryer vent caked with lint, hot and compressed.

Pulling over a deck table (the one that was free-to-me from the neighbors) I climb up and clean off the vent. The fierce yellow jackets and my avoidance of any unnecessary house chores might have kept us alive this year. If not for yellow jackets, no under-deck detective work. If not for the under-deck detective work, house fire, since the vent was blocked by dryer lint—caked up pieces of laundry.

This yellow jacket story is to say as much frustration as the laundry brings up for me, I am not mad at the laundry anymore, or at least I resent it less than before. Our relationship is slowly improving. In 2013, after I had my second child, we had our lowest moments. There was. So. Much. Laundry. I had a big heap of clean clothes that I didn't want to fold and I worked the weekend and the baby was crying and the toddler was playing and there were so many reasons it was never folded.

My resentment has evaporated in delegation, having solidly given the kid-laundry task over to the babysitter or au pair or nanny at some point after having twins. The twins, the last two to be born in our family so far, meant we employed an au pair—four at last count—first from Thailand, Colombia, Ecuador, France. The labels on the clothes, the hands doing the laundry—both are global now.

My foot hits a blue plastic hedgehog with wheels and I look up from my phone, skipping over the toy. Walking towards my office, towards the words I will write—messages to students, comments on papers, discussion paragraphs in the research article, curriculum map, interview guide—I leave the laundry behind. The washing machine window gleams, a portal into nothing, into everything.

A Coda: Making Sense of Art

Focusing on the traumatic and the mundane through flash creative nonfiction, the above creative pieces illustrate the ways in which online mothering communities intersect with women's lived experiences. Below, we reflect on each other's artwork and consider the themes elevated in the pieces. These themes include the role of loose social connections, digital communities, and intergenerational healing in motherhood.

Laura's Response to "Coup Mothers"

Reading Agata's piece helped me understand why I always liked her so much—from the moments reading her posts about a garden being ruined by workers fixing her sewage line to learning about her work teaching English at a men's college. In my own childhood, which I'm both appreciating and healing as I'm parenting, it's very easy to think that I'm the only one on this journey; the only one who finds myself repeating things I never wanted to from my own childhood and then figuring out, slowly, carefully, painfully, how not to. Like many friends of the digital, pandemic era, we have never met in person, although when I was solo parenting for a few too many weekends and was losing my serenity, she offered to be on the other end of a few phone calls to help me find it again.

This narrative helps me appreciate the depths of division in this country of ours, the fear and the pain that many have experienced in these last years, and the ways in which making a space for each other is sometimes all we can do. I'm honored to be even a small part of making that space.

Agata's narrative also helps me appreciate my own family's journey from a pre-communist place to this one; to understand that they were not alone in their pain. I am reminded of my own grandfather, the blue-eyed one, the one born in Austria-Hungary when that was a country, the one who came to the U.S. on a boat when he was three years old and whose mother burned his immigration papers either before or after his father killed himself. That grandfather picked mushrooms in the Ohio woods, knew which ones were for eating and which ones were not.

I am reminded of my grandmother, the red-haired one, not married to the blue-eyed one, the last of her siblings to die at ninety-four. She could pick mushrooms from the Ohio forest, too.

Neither of them taught me. I have little idea which fungi I should eat other than the ones I find at the store (although I do love them, especially sauteed with some wine). From Agata's Facebook page, I learned that I could eat puffball mushrooms—only three days ago, my brother found puffballs in the forest, and sauteed them into cutlets with my mother. In the wood wide web, I have become a hesitant stranger, an awkward novice. The world wide web, though? At the computer, like Agata, I find resources that nourish me—like this Facebook group—bite by bite.

Agata's Response to "Love in the Time of Laundry"

Laura's beautiful essay encourages me to consider the contrast between the invisibility of housework when I was a child and the visibility and embodiment of housework now when I'm a mother. What I mean here is that my own mother, like Laura, surely had to do laundry—tons of it: poopy cloth diapers, onesies, pajamas, school uniforms, tights, socks, undies, shirts, dance clothes, soccer clothes, sweaty T-shirts, bedsheets, blankets, kitchen towels, bath towels, tablecloths, napkins, curtains, and more. There was a washing machine in our small bathroom: first a cylindrical drum called Frania, an R2D2 lookalike, with a rubber draining hose but no inflow pipe, a loud cumbersome metal appliance that had to be filled with water from the showerhead dropped inside; then a proper boxy front-loader that, like Laura's appliance, resembled a spaceship, with its round thick-glassed window looking into a shiny perforated drum inside, with the blue icon polar SUPERAUTOMAT on a polished white background, with its mysterious buttons and knobs. Although I don't remember Mother doing laundry, she must have, including in the middle of the Martial Law, and during chronic shortages of detergent, soap, and starch. She must have done laundry while preparing her high school ESL classes, grading tests, and looking up phrases like "at the end of the tether" or "bite the bullet" in her English-Polish dictionary.

But now, of course, Laura and I both commiserate with other academic mamas who complain about the incessant and unrecognized housework that infringes on quality time we could spend with our kids and on our precious research time as well. Yet I myself took my clean socks for granted until early adulthood, thinking of Mother only in terms of her drinking, her sulking, her raging.

There was another fancy washing machine I remember, the same polar front-loader, in my grandparents' apartment. And it was there that I remember looking inside it and watching our clothes and towels spinning, spinning, spinning. I remember the machine's reassuring low rumble. There I was, kneeling on the cold bathroom tiles, hypnotized by whatever moved in circles behind that round window. Laura compares the round window of her machine to a portal to another world, and I think of a Soviet song commemorating Yuri Gagarin, "Созвездье Гагарина," or "Constellation Gagarin." Yuri Gulyaev's cheerful tenor intoned "He said: let's go! And waved his hand, Carrying himself above the earth," as images of Gagrin's spherical helmet with a round face opening, his own personal appliance with a portal to another world, appeared on our black-and-white TV screen in front of which my grandmother folded laundry.

Art and Social Science

Reflecting on our own essays and lived experiences, we noted multiple connections with well-established patterns in social science regarding the experience of contemporary living and mothering. These include the importance of loose connections for mothers' well-being, the role of digital communities in contemporary mothering, whiteness in mothering, and the process of healing traumatic experiences (Strange et al., 2014). In particular, we notice that in our essays and experiences, online groups can offer loose connections, a space to discuss a wide variety of topics that seem taboo in person, and an opportunity to choose the level of engagement in a wide variety of conversations. We consider these in more detail below.

Loose Connections

Mothers' support groups are a long-standing source of social support for mothers in industrial economies. In women's lives and popular culture, these groups serve as a way to meet new mothers when a woman has her first baby, as profiled in the 2019–2020 Netflix series *Working Moms*. Research from the medical and social work fields indicates that although not included in postpartum care from the health system, egalitarian peer relationships and social interactions are uniquely beneficial for new mothers' health and well-being (Strange et al., 2014). In the process of participating in social groups for new mothers, women receive validation, definition, and honesty regarding what it means to be a "good mother" from other women in a similar stage of life, in ways that they cannot from other family members or friends (Johnson, 2015). Social support in groups involves emotional assistance (listening and reassuring), appraisal assistance (encouragement and validating the appropriateness of feelings, experience, and behaviors), and informational assistance (Dennis, 2003). These relationships are most meaningful when women believe that the other people in their social group share characteristics with them (Strange et al., 2014).

Privilege in Mothering and Digital Communities

We are mindful of the privileged position from which we enter digital discourse. The Facebook group offers a space for immediate venting and resource gathering from educated, mostly middle-class women. The daily work of healing, the long-term, profound change that we are both engaged in, comes with access to healthcare—including mental health resources—and our ability to hire other women/mothers to take over some of the housework. In somewhat similar ways to our Facebook group, social media facilitates solidarity among other groups: transnational networks of migrants, LGBTQ communities, disabled professionals (Frömming et al., 2017) and offers bonding and problem-solving space for anti-racist activists (Shirazi, 2010). However, social media groups are also often spaces where profound differences in lived experiences are dismissed in group conversations. For example, groups in which we have participated have often involved a white woman posting about a topic related to race, a woman of color pointing out why the initial post is problematic, and the initial poster then deleting her post and/or blocking the person who engaged in discussion—an example of racial gaslighting (Davis & Ernst, 2019). In the case of our group, one attempt to address this issue is a no-delete policy, and administrators take screenshots of discussions that seem to be headed in this direction for later posting. At the request of mothers of color, a separate group was created for (mostly white) woman who wished to have discussions about race that many mothers of color in the group did not want to read.

Digital Communities

In the digital era, mothers access peer relationships online and in person (Price et al., 2018; Valtchanov et al., 2014). With increased social isolation related to employment and the ensuing physical moves and time limitations, online communities have met an important need (Madge & O'Connor, 2006) that only increased between the COVID pandemic of 2019–2022 (and counting). Although both authors of this chapter joined the digital group discussed here as more experienced mothers and not first-time mothers, continued peer support relationships may in fact be one of the most important factors in mothers' thriving (Nelson, 2009). In our experience, these supportive peer relationships empower women to engage in the many challenges, dilemmas, and joys in life.

Digital communities allow for the integration of personal and professional content, which is important for holistic support and a sense of belonging. Recent research indicates that digital community engagement is beneficial for members of multiple social groups (Eaton et al., 2021; Younas et al., 2020). For example, Gandy-Guedes et al. (2016) analyzed how a particular group of people—social workers—used private and closed Facebook support groups as "an effective tool to combat burnout" as well as for "peer support, informal consultation, emotional support, and personal social connection" (p. 323). Such confidential and selective groups, informally formed, are invaluable sites for sharing of resources, daily frustrations, and "commiserating over shared experiences" (p. 327) as well as obtaining validation, encouragement, and self-care strategies. Respondents in this study indicated trust in group members, which led to both a sense of safety and an experience of support. In addition, they "described how the Facebook group gave them a sense of connectedness even though they lived miles apart and were unable to connect in person" (p. 328). Members said that one of the most important factors in fostering personal growth and connection was that the posts balanced personal and professional content.

The Facebook group that inspired our creative nonfiction pieces offers such a supportive digital community, which represents both personal and professional identities. The findings of the study mentioned above resonate. Our private digital space offers commiseration and constructive feedback, whether we are discussing secondary trauma, work decisions, or the tedium of doing laundry. Our experiences are validated here. We are heard.

Healing Intergenerational Patterns

Like many parents, petrified of the horrors of our own pasts, we are both mindful of learning from our own families' unhealthy patterns—alcohol, emotional dysfunction—and shifting to healthier ones for our children. But Facebook use in itself can be addictive (Lim et al., 2020). Aligning with findings about the dual faces of social media use (Oksa et al., 2021), although there is a danger of social media overuse, the steady, supportive presence of this Facebook group creates the opposite of compulsive behavior, it seems. The group is a support network, a conversation to enter and leave as needed, a repository of sage advice and validation of challenges and frustrations that are part and parcel of being an academic mother.

Art, Scholarship, and Motherhood

Art—in this case, creative nonfiction—is a unique qualitative research and dissemination tool (Miles et al., 2014). For this reason, we offer our art and our research skills as academics to point to the power of digital groups for mothers and mother-scholars. Our experiences and related social science work indicate that online groups that cross between personal and professional identities offer a unique opportunity to support the health and well-being of mothers and children.

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Hell Hath No Fury Like a Scorned Woman's Friend: Reflected Anger in Academic Mother* Online Groups

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There is a comedic sketch performed by duo Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele, in which Key plays Luther, Barack Obama's "anger translator." Playing off Obama's reputation for remaining calm and eloquent even in situations which should make him angry, Luther animatedly expresses the rage that viewers believe Obama must be feeling inside. While the sketch is meant to be a jab at the sangfroid president's demeanor, it also resonates with many viewers who have felt as though they could not truly express their anger due to their role, relationship, or societal expectations. Having an "anger translator" is an appealing prospect: someone else

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who can express the things we are feeling without the consequences. It would be cathartic, validating, and potentially humorous—and may even empower us to take action we otherwise may fear. In this way, it may even qualify as a type of social support.

Though social support has been studied extensively, it remains the subject of an intense positivity bias: the notion of "support" conjures images of gentle hugs, warm casseroles, and kind words. This chapter proposes a new way of understanding how individuals (especially women) support each other: *reflected anger*. We propose that negative emotions can also fuel support processes, particularly among individuals with shared problems and experiences. While we believe this is a widespread phenomenon, this chapter will focus on the unique context of an online support group of academic mothers.

Existing Models of Social Support and Supportive Communication

Social support has been theorized by a variety of scholars in the field of communication. Cohen et al. (2000) note that "social support is often used in a broad sense, referring to any process through which social relationships might promote health and well-being" (p. 4). While more specific aspects of support will be discussed, this broad definition of social support is sufficient for understanding the crucial role social support can play. Moreover, support is helpful in a variety of health and life-changing situations and can have effects on level of distress, which in turn is linked to immune function and physical capability to cope.

Social support, which is a function of social relationships, is "always intended (by the provider of the support) to be helpful," (Heaney & Israel, 2008, p. 190) though that intention is not always successfully enacted or perhaps understood as such. As Lawrence and Schiller Schigelone (2002) note, social support is a crucial coping resource, though it is often viewed from a dyadic perspective. For this reason, it is complex to study; support takes many different forms, and the disconnect between intention and perception can result in poor support or even conflict.

Social Support Versus Supportive Communication

Support can be offered in myriad ways, and a variety of categorizations exist. Research on social support most commonly examines the types of support. The foundational work of Cutrona and Russell (1990) argued the need for the summation and explanation of extant research and various types of social support. Based on previously developed categories (e.g., Cobb, 1979; Cohen et al., 1985; Kahn, 1979; Schaefer et al., 1981; Weiss, 1974), Cutrona and Russell (1990) created the five basic support dimensions, including s*ocial integration/network support* (feeling like part of a group); *esteem support* (when others boost one's self-esteem); *tangible support* (material support, such as finances or physical help); *informational support* (providing guidance of advice for possible solutions); and *emotional support* (broadly, the ways we provide comfort to our cared-for others.)

The effectiveness of different types of support, however, may vary depending on the support provider. For instance, emotional support is typically more helpful when it comes from a close personal relationship, where informational support may be perceived as more helpful when it comes from an expert, such as a medical professional (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003). Heaney and Israel (2008) note that while differentiating between types of support is useful conceptually, in reality many relationships provide a variety of types of support, and it can be difficult to categorize a single supportive interaction as just one of these categories. Importantly, though, each of these forms of support is enacted through communication.

Supportive communication, then, emerged from the "older and broader tradition of interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry centered on the concept of social support" (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 375). Supportive communication can be defined as "verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid" (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 374) and extends past the types of support, looking into the communicative processes and strategies enacted. Early work in supportive communication that stressed communicative processes (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984; Albrecht et al., 1982) was extended by scholars in multiple traditions examining *troubles talk* (Jefferson, 1988; Pritchard, 1993), *comforting communication* (Burleson, 1990), *coping* (Gottlieb, 1978), and *received support* (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Schumaker & Brownell, 1984). The integration of social support types and communicative processes culminated into "a distinctive communication or interactional perspective on social support" (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 384).

Reflected Anger

Recognizing the importance of supportive communication broadly, emotional support is one of the most common strategies—and one of the most effective, particularly among women (MacGeorge et al., 2002). Established models of social support describe emotional support as "helping distressed others work through their upset by listening to, empathizing with, legitimizing, and actively exploring their feelings" (Burleson, 2003, p. 552). Typically, emotional support is understood through the analogy of being a shoulder to cry on: the support provider is a sounding board for the expression of negative emotions, passively listening or offering validation of the target's feelings. As it is typically studied, the purpose of emotional support is to help vent and dissipate negative emotions. It is considered successful through the restoration of the emotional equilibrium of a target: helping them find peace with their emotions and return to a more positive mental state (Cohen & McKay, 1984).

We believe, however, that emotional support can take a different form: a megaphone for amplifying feelings of rage. As such, we introduce a unique form of emotional support rooted in empathic anger, or the experience of anger on another's behalf (Hoffman, 2000; Vitaglione & Barnett, 2003). We term this communicative process *reflected anger*, in which a support provider gives voice to the anger they perceive the target does or should feel in an effort to offer support. Reflected anger support is provided through the verbal or nonverbal demonstration of anger toward a perpetrator in the presence of the victim (and, ostensibly, the absence of the perpetrator) with the goals of validating the target's negative emotions, providing catharsis, and empowering them to take action.

In reflected anger, support providers serve as emotional "hype (wo)men," giving voice to anger that the target may not feel comfortable expressing. For example, when a woman complains to a friend about her partner's transgression, the friend may perform a hypothetical tirade directed at the offending partner—who will never hear a word of it. For example, Dani may vent to Layla about how her (Dani's) husband did not complete the chores he had promised to do, and Layla responds by referring to him by some colorful names and ranting about his laziness.[1] This act demonstrates that the transgressed-upon woman's anger is indeed justified. For some transgressions, hearing this anger reflected back to her may be cathartic enough for the woman to move forward. However, in the face of other transgressions, it may inspire her to take action against her partner. We believe that reflected anger is especially important due to gendered politeness norms, in which women's expressions of anger are often discouraged (Ünal, 2004); women may feel as if they should not express their own anger, so they allow others to do it for them.

One difference between reflected anger and other forms of supportive communication is the confidential nature of expression. The reflector never expresses their anger to the perpetrator directly. The supporter/reflector is not concerned about the perpetrator's feelings or perspective. The reflector does not buy into the "both sides of the story" philosophy; however, the reflector will take care to not overstep boundaries that will impact any of the relationships should the victim reconcile with the perpetrator.

In the following sections, we conceptually distinguish reflected anger from some similar concepts in the extant literature on social support and supportive communication: empathic anger, co-rumination, and communal coping.

Empathic Anger

Reflected anger is a form of support that can be used either in dyads or groups. It differs in degree depending on the severity of the transgression and is typically only performed when there is a strong bond between the supporter and the victim. However, much like close friends are not always the best providers of social support (Wright & Bell, 2003), reflected anger can be particularly powerful when coming from others with shared experiences. We theorize that this is due to the experience of empathic anger.

Empathic anger is a concept rooted in psychology. It arises when "the interests of a cared-for other have been thwarted" (Batson et al., 2007, p. 1271). It is an emotional experience in which a person empathizes with the experience of a victim and perceives that an action taken against them was intentionally harmful (Hechler & Kessler, 2018). In other words, when our loved ones are hurt, we get angry on their behalf and wish to support them (Frijda, 1988; Keck, 2019; Landmann & Hess, 2017). Empathic anger is rooted in emotion but can lead to behavioral responses such as "undoing the harm, compensating the victim, and punishing harm-doers" (Hechler & Kessler, 2018, p. 271). These responses are typically targeted toward the wrongdoer, rather than transformed into support for the victim. The goal of empathic anger is "not to restore fairness so much as to get revenge or protect the interests of the cared-for other" (Batson et al., 2007, p. 1273).

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[1] Examples in this chapter are purely hypothetical to protect the privacy of members of the online group. They are based on common themes, but not any specific posts.

Empathic anger is similar to reflected anger in the shared emotion directed toward the transgressor by both the target and their supporter(s). However, while empathic anger is an emotional response, reflected anger is a specific communicative act intended to address those emotions. Indeed, reflected anger is one possible result of feelings of empathic anger. Empathic anger may result in actions taken against a transgressor to "even the score," while reflected anger is an indirect expression of the supporter's felt anger toward a transgressor intended only to validate or express the emotions of the target. We believe that when a supporter has experienced similar problems or transgressions, feelings of empathic anger may be heightened. However, when individuals move beyond emotional empathy and into shared ownership of the hardship, another distinct form of supportive communication emerges: communal coping.

Communal Coping

Communal coping is "the pooling of resources and efforts of several individuals (e.g., couples, families, or communities) to confront adversity" (Lyons et al., 1998, p. 579). One example might be a town coming together to recover from the disastrous effects of a tornado (Afifi et al., 2014). In their foundational work on communal coping, Lyons et al. (1998) assert that "communal coping is a process in which a stressful event is substantively appraised and acted upon in the context of close relationships" (p. 583). Central to the idea of communal coping is that all parties are affected by the stressor and believe that a coordinated response will yield the best results.

Communal coping is distinct from reflected anger, however. While both are clearly communicative processes within a particular community, the ownership of the problem is drastically different. Communal coping occurs in response to a community or group problem. Reflected anger, however, emerges when one member of a community has an issue to which other members respond. The ownership of the problem is not shared; while a person offering support via reflected anger may feel a great deal of empathy for the target, they are not directly impacted by the stressor. A similar supportive communicative process in which individuals unaffected by a stressor take part in the coping process is that of co-rumination.

Co-rumination

While communal coping is focused on group efforts toward addressing a shared stressor, co-rumination is the process of discussing and analyzing each person's individual stressors in a dyadic context with the purpose of providing mutual support (Boren, 2013). *Co-rumination* occurs when we empathize with our co-communicators as a form of self-disclosure to strengthen the relational bond (Arroyo et al., 2017; Calmes & Roberts, 2008).

Colloquially, we might understand co-rumination through the phrases "misery loves company" and "pity party." While talking about shared experiences can unquestionably be helpful for people to understand a situation, excessive talk about problems can be problematic. According to Felton et al. (2019), negative outcomes may result from extensive rehashing of problems. When people we care about join in, we sometimes encourage each other to continue co-rumination and thrive on the negative affect in that relationship (Tompkins et al., 2011). The process is characterized by analysis, expression, and reflection, but not necessarily toward healing.

While reflected anger is also often employed to strengthen relational bonds, it is far more one-sided. The focus on reflected anger is to help one member of the dyad or group to process their negative (although perhaps unexpressed) emotions, not to allow all parties to wallow in their own problems. Reflected anger is similar to communal coping and co-rumination in that the supporter/reflector is empathizing with the victim/target about the violation. However, reflected anger is intense, verbalized anger as opposed to a comforting or sympathetic posture. Supporters who express reflected anger are not necessarily interested in logical analysis or critical thinking related to the problem; they acknowledge and even encourage the target's negative emotions but do so with the intention of validation and empowerment rather than sympathy.

While reflected anger shares similarities with many other concepts such as empathic anger, communal coping, and co-rumination, we believe that it is a distinct and powerful form of supportive communication. It is characterized by an *intentional communicative response* to *another's problem* (rather than a shared one) designed to validate emotion and provide support *without reciprocal self-disclosure or shared wallowing*.

Importantly, we do not believe that it is restricted to close interpersonal relationships; while supportive communication can certainly be offered on a dyadic, interpersonal level, the supporting partner may not have sufficient shared experience to empathize. In these cases, supportive communication may be more impactful when enacted by weak ties with a shared experience but little actual involvement in a target's day-to-day life. One of the most common sources of this support is in the context of online support groups. Here, we provide a case study of reflected anger within the context of a specific online group: academic mothers.

Academic Mothers' Groups as a Unique Context for Reflected Anger

Due to the geographically dispersed nature of the academic job market, academics and graduate students are often separated from traditional, kin-based support networks. Mothers in academia are particularly vulnerable to the effects of this missing support: without their own parents or immediate family geographically close, many develop "supplemental families" to compensate for the "village" it takes to raise one's children (Braithwaite et al., 2010). In most heterosexual relationships, gendered division of labor suggests that women shoulder much of the emotional labor, having less control over leisure time due to multitasking and domestic tasks (Bryson, 2016). However, even in same-sex, single/separated parent, or other kinds of relationships, women still face many of the same stressors of sexism in academia and expectations that they will do care work both at home and at work. For academics in particular, the more "flexible" schedule often results in unequal domestic loads; academic mothers in both early and mid-career stages regularly assume the "second shift" duties of childcare in addition to their career (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2015).

Academic mothers in particular often turn to mediated channels to fulfill support needs, including "academic mama," or "AcaMama," groups, a niche forum for this unique intersection of identities (Motherscholar

Collective et al., 2021). These virtual communities offer users access to a broad array of social support, particularly emotional support, from a caring community of women with similar professional backgrounds and shared values who face similar challenges. Mothers using these platforms benefit from a variety of unique features and affordances of mediated communication which contribute to an environment ripe for supportive communication.

Some Acamama* groups have over 11,000 members, at very different stages of their academic careers and parenthood. Other subgroups form around smaller shared identities, where members share similar, specific challenges (e.g., are all in a similar life stage with young children born in the same year, searching for industry roles, junior scholars). The subgroups have between 500 and 750 members, creating a closer-knit community with more shared interests, and not all are members of the main group. In childbirth year cohort groups in particular, most group members joined these subgroups during their pregnancies and shared a variety of concerns and experiences with each other, celebrating births, birthdays, and milestones as well as commiserating over struggles with pregnancy, breastfeeding, toddlerhood, and so on. The similarity in ages and shared experiences of sleepless nights, parenting through illness (both their own and their children's), and bodily trauma combined with being an educated woman (often) in academia creates a strong bond among many members, and in addition to seeking informational support, there is a sense of community, and many group members are connected on social media platforms outside of the group (and even meet up in real life).

Social Support in Online Spaces

Online social support has been studied extensively, particularly in instances of illness (Chung, 2014; Tong et al., 2013; Wright & Rains, 2013). The affordances of social media have been theorized to foster social support, subsequently predicting both self-care and improved psychological health (Lin & Kishore, 2021). These affordances, such as the lack of geographical restrictions, asynchronicity, archived nature, and mobility, benefit users in ways that can supplement or supplant more traditional, face-to-face support models. Online support groups can be composed of members from anywhere in the world, unrestricted by geographic proximity. This allows users to coalesce around meaningful shared identities that may not be shared by more physically proximal others, such as individuals or family members living with rare diseases (Tikkanen et al., 2018). This homophily, or feeling of kinship due to a shared identity, enables users to experience greater trust in other users, which can lead to deeper and more meaningful connections.

Further, the asynchronous nature of online support groups affords deeper disclosure as well as a better and more convenient type of social support. The lack of nonverbal cues lends a sense of anonymity, even to users who are acquainted offline: users cannot see or be seen by others. As such, users feel more willing to disclose vulnerable stories and requests for support (Suler, 2004). Moreover, because users can reply whenever they want, these calls of distress are answered by individuals with time to compose both themselves and a more ideal support message. Rather than needing to manage any negative nonverbal reactions to a disclosure while simultaneously composing a message of support, responders can focus all of their cognitive energy on being supportive (Rains et al., 2019). The asynchronicity of these groups also provides flexibility for users. They can browse when they most need the information, rather than when a meeting is formally scheduled. Similarly, the archived nature of online support groups means that members can search for answers to questions that have been asked previously or can be buoyed by revisiting old messages of support.

Finally, the mobility of mediated communication allows women to access their support system regardless of physical location. Smartphones, laptops, and tablets provide access to online groups immediately after experiencing a transgression, allowing women to vent or express frustration while the feelings are most intense. Women who can access instantaneous feedback to vent or express annoyance may be better equipped to address the transgression with the transgressor if they feel supported and have had the opportunity to express their anger and frustration before with supporters.

The "AcaMama" Space

According to Simonson et al. (2011), "being female contributes to the tendency to be interpersonally and emotionally focused, which may contribute to greater distress in response to interpersonal stressors" (p. 942). Thus, it makes sense that women often seek support from other women, especially when strong emotions, such as anger, result from transgressions involving a partner, friend, or colleague. While there is diversity amongst the members of "AcaMama" groups in terms of race, sexuality, and partnership status (among other things), the commonalities seem to override these differences and create a shared collective bond. However, even the broadest Acamama* groups are inclusive of women who are either students, working in academia, or have higher level degrees and are now working in private industry. This education seems to lead to/correlate with shared values (the importance of science, generally liberal politics, importance of recognizing and celebrating diversity). The members also share a feminist perspective in general and face similar struggles.

Targets who share in the Acamama* spaces may expect that other members can disagree respectfully without arguing because they are trained to use critical thinking, argumentation, and reflection in conversations. Unlike some online communities where hateful rhetoric and arguing is the norm, academic mothers' groups often employ effective and appropriate communication strategies in response to group members. This does not mean that women in academic mother groups are opposed to disagreement or being challenged in their posts, but rather that they expect any opposing opinions will be delivered respectfully and with evidence. Targets may be more likely to disclose about transgressions when they feel as if supporters are trustworthy and fair. As such, mothers in this space may feel more comfortable sharing their problems, knowing they will be supported.

Further, while women in these groups may consider their relationships as strong, the geographical spread of members means that they are unlikely to be involved in each other's daily lives. Lima et al. (2017) found that people with Facebook relationships use bridging social capital to build community. Similar to weak ties (Wright & Rains, 2013), relationships in academic mothers' groups are more likely physically distant but the shared identity among group members often promotes trust. Relatedly, Kao and Sapp (2020) found that bridging social capital, bonding social capital, and trust result in high levels of community attachment, thus creating a cycle of self-disclosure and support. Group members may feel like stronger ties unfairly judge or lack objectivity when providing support or are perhaps not knowledgeable about specific stressors. Thus, relationships built through mediated channels might be the ideal balance between perceived closeness in the relationship and distance to the transgressor.

According to Optimal Matching Theory, support seekers fare best when support is found through channels that best fit the seeker's needs (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Green-Hamann & Sherblom, 2014; Westmaas et al., 2020; Wright & Rains, 2013). Academic women with hectic schedules and multiple tasks to balance may find that online support groups with women who have similar lives might fit best. While benefits may vary based on the amount of energy and effort a user places into requesting and providing support from others in the space, the majority of users experience both emotional and informational support (Ballantine & Stephenson, 2011). When social support group users receive informational and emotional support, they feel empowered to take action against their problems (Johnston et al., 2013), which can be a powerful tool in recovery. Most studies of emotional support on these forums focus on positive expressions of empathy, validation, and kindness—but those emotions may not be the only ones addressed online.

*Reflected Anger and Acamamas**

Imagine a hypothetical scenario in which a woman heads to her Acamama* group to complain to her peers about her partner being unsupportive of her need to attend departmental functions outside of business hours. Typical responses in a group like this might include sympathy (*"That must be so hard!"*), identity affirmations (*"It's tough being an academic and a mother, but you're doing great at both!"*), or advice (*"Can you talk to your chair about scheduling more events during business hours?"*). However, other common responses take on a very different form: reflected anger. Support providers in this vein will attack the transgressor in an effort to lift up the target. For example, Acamamas* may go after the spouse: *"Your husband is a man child, and it sounds to me like HE needs to be put to bed early tonight. The kids can probably handle themselves just fine. Whiner!"* They may also attack the department: *"WTF? How often are they scheduling events outside of normal working hours? This is outrageous! It's discriminatory against working parents!"*

While this is a purely fictional example, both of these responses demonstrate how support providers can get angry on behalf of the target. They feed into and validate feelings of anger and serve to make the target feel supported by showing that her outrage at her partner (and her department) is justified. Clever enough comments may even change her mood by making her laugh. A key component of this interaction is that reflected anger occurs when there is emotional support *without* informational support. The absence of other types of support is key, as reflected anger does not occur with suggestions for how to fix a problem, only confirmation that the situation is indeed rage-inducing. Indeed, many Acamama* groups have developed norms around asking for support. Posts with statements like, "Just screaming into the void here…" or "I just need to vent for a minute" are typically posted with the expectation of reflected anger in the responses, while other posts might start with "Looking for advice" to seek informational support.

The mediated nature of an online support group—particularly one composed of geographically dispersed weak ties—creates an environment ripe for the phenomenon of reflected anger for a number of reasons. First, in close relationships, reflected anger can be potentially problematic: negative verbalizations against an important person or part of the target's life could potentially "poison the well" down the road. In online communities, however, the relative lack of connection to real-life relationships allows for freedom to both seek and provide this particular form of emotional support: for example, an Acamama* can freely complain about her partner not helping prepare food for a dinner party, knowing that no one in her audience is likely to be at that party (or any future ones). Since support providers are unlikely to ever meet a target in person, reflected anger similarly poses no threat to their relationship with the source of the target's frustrations: there is no relationship, so it cannot be damaged. Wright and Rains (2013) found that people seeking weak-tie support in online communities as a balance between support and relational maintenance had more positive and fewer negative outcomes.

Second, online support groups are often rife with reflected anger because individuals feel more empowered to speak freely from behind a keyboard (Suler, 2004). In particular, these online spaces allow mothers to share personal aspects of their lives free from judgment, such as sharing concerns related to their sex lives (Schoenebeck, 2013). In addition to providing a safe and cathartic place to "vent" for the individual who has experienced a transgression, however, online support groups can also enable more disinhibited responses from other members of the group. These responses may take the form of reciprocal and vulnerable self-disclosure (DeAndrea et al., 2011), but we argue that they can also contain a sort of positive toxicity stemming from reflected anger. In the absence of nonverbal cues and presence, users feel free to type things they would likely never say in person (Suler, 2004), concocting elaborate conversations much like one might do when "arguing" in the shower. In this way, their disinhibited anger is simply a form of support for the target. Indeed, Bosson et al. (2006) found that individuals are more likely to bond interpersonally over shared negative feelings toward a third party than positive ones. These expressions of reflected anger can serve as a bonding mechanism, and the "bigger" the anger (when appropriate), the stronger the resultant relational bonds.

Third, online support systems often elicit reciprocal self-disclosure, where individuals share stories of similar experience to demonstrate the target's own situation is "not abnormal or strange" (Tong et al., 2013, p. 419). Individuals often feel a stronger tie to those with whom they share experiences. Building trust among online confidantes is important for the target to fully express their own experiences. For Acamamas*, the inherent homophily among group members (mothers in academia) provides the context for targets to disclose the experience for which they need support and in turn, receive the reflected anger from like-minded individuals. Li et al. (2015) found that "using social context cues as an effective support-seeking strategy" (p. 595) contributes to social presence and trustworthiness which are key for making online support systems more personal and social. Further, these shared experiences likely fuel the support provider's rage: having experienced similar transgressions against themselves, they understand and can validate the target's anger more effectively. For example, an Acamama* considering divorce may receive more reflected anger support from group members who have experienced divorce and want to validate her pain.

Finally, many online platforms for social support groups offer myriad ways for users to respond and demonstrate their rage. Facebook, a leading space for Acamama* communities, offers users the opportunity to provide support in the form of text, links, emojis, stickers, or GIFs. For individuals unwilling or unable to express their emotions through language, they can demonstrate lower degrees of reflected anger through simply clicking on the "angry face" emoji instead of the "Like" button, or by sending a furious GIF image. These responses support the target by identifying anger as a primary emotional response to the post, naming and/or validating the target's emotions by ostensibly claiming it as their own. In this way, users can express reflected anger in both direct and ambiguous ways. Further, the ability to see the responses from others can feed into a more collective experience of reflected anger, so even "small" responses like emojis can add up to a large amount of support.

*Contextualizing Reflected Anger for Acamamas**

The shared identities and experiences of niche online groups give credence to the anger, as supporters have likely experienced similar violations. Nambisan (2011) found that homophily among online support group users had a significant effect on feelings of perceived empathy for users. In online spaces where mothers can vent about common frustrations such as their partners, their job, and parenting (Schoenebeck, 2013), it is highly likely that other mothers who have similar jobs or approaches to parenting have experienced these same frustrations. As a result, their reflected anger might not only serve as a performative form of support, but also serve as their own catharsis against a previous transgressor.

In addition to providing support, the Acamama* groups may provide a space for critically evaluating reflected anger and other emotions related to an experience for a multitude of reasons. First, although the groups are comprised of women with a shared identity (academic women), the diversity among other identities, such as race, ethnicity, and age, is vast. When seeking support from strong ties, individuals may have lived such similar lives that there is little room for new perspectives regarding the issue. When disclosing such experiences to a large, diverse group, targets are more likely to be exposed to alternative viewpoints and solutions, which may not happen when seeking support from strong ties (Wright & Rains, 2013). And, in the face of such diversity, the receipt of reflected anger may be even more validating!

Limitations

It is important to note that the women who participate in these groups share a great deal of privilege. By nature of their memberships and identity as academics, all are highly educated, and many are privileged through socioeconomic status, race, sexuality, and gender identity. There are also some shared assumptions of political orientation, such as that Acamamas* identify as feminists and are typically politically liberal. These layers of privilege, particularly as they intersect, likely influence the expressions of reflected anger, because as a safe space with similarly privileged mamas*, there are shared assumptions of resources and agency—though it should be noted that these groups also commonly share resources, taking contributions toward funds to help members who are struggling in various ways.

It is important to continue to study the ways in which privilege influences expression of reflected anger in other groups.

Conclusion

Academic mothers are uniquely positioned to experience the tribulations of motherhood and an often intensive work environment while trying to maintain personal relationships. Doing so with young children in the midst of a pandemic adds an additional layer of stress. This can result in both personal and professional problems with which only individuals who share these intersecting identities can empathize. Consequently, these groups are an essential part of many Acamamas*' built support networks. The technological affordances of these online communities provide mobility, asynchronicity, and at least partial confidentiality to express their feelings about personal transgressions. More importantly, they provide a space where Acamamas* can expect helpful, supportive responses from weak ties whom they trust. Trust, shared experiences, and deep community bonds can create an environment rife with positive emotional support—but importantly, sometimes a validation of anger is even more effective. These are safe spaces in which Acamamas* can receive support in the form of reflected anger from individuals who (a) likely understand but are in no way involved in the transgression (as in communal coping), (b) may feel great empathy or even have a strong emotional response (as in empathic anger) but (c) offer only indirect expressions of their rage in a performative effort to validate the target, as opposed to joining in a negative spiral through expressing their own experiences (as in co-rumination). In these cases, the communicative process of reflected anger serves as a powerful tool in supporting fellow Acamamas*. The validation, catharsis, and humor garnered from these interactions can uplift and empower a target, proving that while hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, her friends are really the ones you need to look out for.

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Online Groups as Source for Communication about the Taboo: Sexual Implications for Academic Mothers*

Lauren Walker

Considered a fundamental aspect of well-being and health, sexuality is an important contributor to quality of life and relationships (World Health Organization, 2010). The World Health Organization further declares that sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach and affirms "pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence" (2010). Sexuality encompasses our values and beliefs about sexuality, as well the way we express ourselves as a sexual being. Sexuality is not just about sexual activity but rather includes our thoughts and feelings about our bodies, relationships, desires, gender identity, and sexual

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orientation, including also the way we express ourselves sexually (Sexual Education Resource Centre, 2022). Pregnancy, labor and delivery, postpartum adjustment, and transition to motherhood can all have immediate and significant impacts on sexuality including changes in sexual function and sexual identities. Additionally, for mothers who are employed in high powered careers, such as academia, challenges in maintaining work-life balance (Bowyer et al., 2021; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016) and managing job stress can also impact sexual function (Papaefstathiou et al., (2020).

Sexual dysfunction, diagnosed when sexual function concerns are accompanied by psychological distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), is highly prevalent among women, in particular mothers with young children. Sexual concerns during pregnancy are as high as 80% (Daud et al., 2019). The number of women experiencing sexual dysfunction increases five-fold following childbirth (compared to pre-pregnancy), with estimates as high as 40% (Fuchs et al., 2021). Despite inundation with sexual images and messaging, sexuality is still largely considered a taboo topic to discuss more personally (Crespo-Fernández, 2018), and in particular, in any way that indicates vulnerability. The stigma that accompanies discussion of sexuality prevents access to sexual health care and social support, leaving many mothers with no one to talk to, and with a sense that they are alone in their experience. Furthermore, quality sexual health care can be difficult to access, constrained by barriers relating to economic resources, regional disparity, and stigma or embarrassment. Online support in the form of social media, forums, and private groups can potentially help fill a gap in care and support for mothers regarding sexuality.

The Impact of Motherhood on Sexuality

Inherently an interpersonal experience, sexual relationships are influenced by social interactions, roles, and expectations. Intimate relationship dynamics are impacted in the transition to motherhood, in managing multiple roles of mother, partner, and individual. Identity as “mother” can also negatively impact identification with sexual identity. The combination of demands of mothering often taking priority over the self, and the contribution of social expectations of motherhood as being antithetical to sexiness (Poduval & Poduval, 2009). Through Western social norms, motherhood has largely been constructed as an asexual identity, with such de-sexualization resulting in challenges for mothers to connect with their sense of sexuality (Montemurro & Siefken, 2012). Esther Perel, a renowned sexuality and couples' therapist, is quoted in her podcast; "Sexuality doesn't emerge in the space of mother, it exists in the space of woman and lover" (Perel, 2017, 38:00).

In addition to the social dynamics of sexual interactions, physical and psychological changes accompanying the transition to motherhood are abundant. Changes in sense of self, self-esteem, and relationship to one's body, sleep deprivation, and fatigue, as well as the weight of responsibility for managing a household, can all impact sexuality. Higher depression and relationship dissatisfaction, commonly experienced during the transition to motherhood, are associated with moderate and marked sexual function problems (Dawson et al., 2020). Further exploration of postpartum sexuality demonstrates that many women have concerns regarding resuming sexual intercourse, sexual frequency, managing fatigue, fear of painful sex and pre-occupation with body image (O'Malley et al., 2019).

Furthermore, during pregnancy and in the immediate postpartum period, physical changes related to pelvic health are profound. These include vaginal dryness in the context of hormonal changes, recovery from genital and pelvic floor trauma, difficulty with arousal and orgasm, sexual pain, and a lack of sexual desire (Fuchs et al., 2021). Such concerns appear to be widespread across different geographic regions and cultures. Assessment of sexual function during pregnancy suggests rates of difficulty as high as 78% among a sample of Iranian women (Hajnasiri et al., 2020) and 58% in a Brazilian sample (Guendler et al., 2019). Both studies indicate a positive correlation between sexual difficulty and higher levels of education. In one Malaysian study, 86% of postpartum participants described difficulties with vaginal lubrication (n = 113), 70% reported reduced sexual desire (n = 92) and 63% were experiencing sexual pain disorder (n = 83) (Khalid et al., 2020). Prevalence of difficulty with orgasm and arousal was around 10% for each. In a study of over 1400 Australian women, sexual difficulties were reported by 89% of women in the first 3 months postpartum (Mcdonald et al., 2015). Potential negative impacts on sexuality are profound for some mothers, and may be additionally compounded by other roles and responsibilities.

The Impact of Academic Work on Women's Sexuality

Sexuality is one of many areas that may become strained, in the context of managing dual roles of raising a family and having a career. This may be in part due to changed identities and roles, but also due to competing responsibilities. For example, when work extends beyond the designated hours of the workday, as is common and often esteemed within academia, time allocated for the family and for the self can become threatened or neglected (McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016). Therefore, if academic mothers do not also have opportunities to foster their identities outside of the roles of 'academic' and 'mother', and within the roles of 'women' and 'lover', sexuality can become swallowed up by these competing identities.

Stress related to work can also impact sexuality. In a study conducted with medical residents, 'job stress' was found to be predictive of sexual problems for women, whereas for men, 'personal burnout' rather than job stress, played more of a role in the development of sexual difficulties (Papaefstathiou et al., (2020). Therefore, women may be more personally impacted by high-stress, demand-oriented careers such as academia, compared to their male counterparts. For women, high job stress is related to sexual function and is associated with declines in vaginal lubrication and orgasm; however, changes in sexual desire were not observed (Papaefstathiou et al., (2020).

Academia is a career path well known to be associated with high job stress (Naidoo-Chettey & du-Plessis, 2021). For academics, performance-based outcome assessment appears to be a main source of academic job stress and is particularly prevalent for faculty in Anglo-American systems who are subject to more market-oriented university systems (Shin & Jung, 2014). The quality of the academic work environment has been declining with faculty workloads increasing due to increased managerial work and teaching loads, while job security and autonomy are decreasing (Shin & Jung, 2014; Naidoo-Chettey & du-Plessis, 2021). Despite reports of high job satisfaction, academics report feeling more job stress. Hours spent in teaching and administration are consistently associated with increased job stress, in contrast to number of hours spent doing research (Takahashi, 2016). For women academics in particular, having young children is associated with increased job stress (Takahashi, 2016). For academic mothers , work-life balance has become a critical issue (Naidoo-Chettey & du-Plessis, 2021). Expectations regarding professional accomplishments near perfection tend to be formed pre-motherhood and such expectations are rarely sustainable when the demands of home and academic life conflict (Bowyer et al., 2021). Early career academic women "admit working all the time" before having children (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004, p. 253) fostering unrealistic expectations of "open-ended commitment of time, energy, and personal resources" (Fothergill & Keltey, 2003, p. 16). The academic professional identity has become synonymous with over-achievement and over-performance—states which are very quickly threatened by having children (Bowyer et al., 2021) and which appear to disproportionately affect mothers. Coupled with the differential impact of job stress on women, the unequal distribution of childcare and home responsibilities may converge to affect women's sexuality more negatively.

Sexual education is historically poor in helping prepare people to be resilient in the face of sexual challenges that accompany life changes, health events, and aging. Transition to motherhood is one of these significant changes. Access to sexuality resources is also difficult, with conversations about sexuality rarely taking place between health care providers and patients (Gott et al., 2004). Furthermore, discussions about sexual difficulty inevitably involve vulnerability in admitting lack of knowledge, experiences of distress, or worry about judgment from others. Treatment and education can also take considerable time which may not be easily found when lives are already very full of competing and even contradictory responsibilities. Very little support exists to help academic mothers challenge the social pressures to maintain "it all": being a "good" mother, having a thriving academic career, maintaining an excellent romantic relationship, and being "sexy" while doing it.

Mothers Need Social Support

In her ethnographic work, Tardy (2000) explores health information seeking among informal social networks, such as 'Moms and Tots' groups (Tardy, 2000). She describes the different 'regions' of conversation that occur among mothers in community settings, in which expectations are set for appropriate kinds of conversations. Tardy suggests frontstage, backstage and "back"-backstage, as regions for different kinds of topics, with the front-stage area being the place that most affirms the experience of idealized motherhood. In contrast, she describes the "back"-backstage as the region in which difficult, "inappropriate" or taboo topics are spoken about, namely sexuality. She explains that even in the "back"-backstage setting, conversations among mothers about sex typically occur in a joking manner. In her report, Tardy highlights a prevailing assumption that all moms are “exhausted and not remotely interested in frivolous things like sex” (2000, p. 462). Participants in Tardy’s (2000) ethnographic study described feeling isolated, with no one from whom to get answers about sexual questions (including friends, family, and health care providers). Participants expressed fear of judgment in bringing up the topic of sexuality in the “Mom and Tot” group setting (2000). As an alternative to such face-to-face group contexts, online private communities present an ideal environment for these kinds of conversations. In contrast to what is portrayed in the public sphere, private online communities offer the sense of a more secure and candid environment that allows for intimate discussions about sensitive topics (Johnson, 2015). The virtual anonymity afforded by connecting with people outside of one’s immediate neighborhood or city can create an environment more conducive to honest disclosure. Such groups often create policies or norms that demand respect, validation, and supportive responses. Participants often feel freedom from the embarrassment or judgment that may be experienced within their personal social networks (e.g., friends and family) or through encounters with health providers and peer-based social programs.

In their book, “The Mommy Myth”, Douglas and Michaels discuss the enormous “chasm between the ridiculous, honey-hued ideals of motherhood in the mass media and the reality of mothers’ everyday lives” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 2). Magazine stories and cultural representations of motherhood often glamorize what it means to be a mother, painting a picture of a fulfilling and joyful experience in which stories of challenges are either neglected or glossed over. Mothers are caught between this overly positive imagery and the reality that parenting is hard. Online media can uphold this biased and glamorous presentation, but it can also present the real and raw moments of motherhood—the moments of mess, chaos, depression, frustration, and lost patience. In contrast, online communities (such as private Facebook groups), can potentially offer a more realistic and candid view of motherhood that hasn’t been polished for a social audience, where mothers can share with other mothers some of their deepest fears, confusion, dilemmas, and biggest failures. Further, they shatter idealistic portrayals of motherhood, all while facilitating support between peers. In doing so, online support sources allow community members to learn that they’re not alone in their distress, offering an important sense of connection and solidarity.

Given the additional stresses of academic work on mothers, it may be equally important to create opportunities for social support in dealing with job stress. Interestingly, social support and emotional intelligence have been found to be moderators of the negative impact of job stress on job performance (Tageja et al., 2019). Intuitively, social support may similarly extend to moderate the effect of job stress on other areas of well-being including mental health and sexuality.

Online Sources of Support and Information for Mothers

Internet-based sources of support are increasingly used by mothers. In a study examining sources of support among mothers, 43% of participants used blogs to communicate with other mothers, 84% indicated social media friends were a form of social support, 89% used social media sites for questions and advice related to parenting, and 99% used the internet for answers to questions about parenting (Baker & Yang, 2018). Given the demand of mothering, the odd hours of the night in which mothers may be up and looking for support to manage a problem, and reports of feelings of isolation, the internet offers an expansive network of immediately accessible resources and connection with other mothers that spans geographic barriers and connects people at similar stages of life.

The era of social media has afforded mothers with unprecedented opportunities for communication and informational support. In a study of adolescent mothers' use of online sources of health information, the most commonly reported issues included sexual health issues ($n = 160$, 86.3%) and sexual assault ($n = 155$, 84.0%) (Logsdon et al., 2014). In another study of new mothers (mean age = 27 years, $n = 157$), participants spent an average of 3 hours on the computer per day, mostly on the internet (McDaniel et al., 2012). Findings suggested that frequency of blogging predicted feelings of social support, and that social support predicted participants' well-being in terms of marital satisfaction, couple conflict, parenting stress, and depression. McDaniel et al. (2012) concluded that blogging might improve new mothers' well-being, as it allows them to feel more connected to the world outside their home through the internet.

Social media might be an even more robust way to seek and receive support. Another study of young mothers reported rates of internet use for pregnancy and parental support ranging from 43% using blogs, to 99%

using the internet for answers to parenting questions (Baker & Yang, 2018). The majority used social media for advice related to pregnancy and parenting (89%; with 98% using Facebook) and considered their social media friends a form of social support (84%). These findings illustrate the changing nature of social support for perinatal women. The Internet, and in particular social media, has the potential to transcend issues related to isolation and provides an opportunity for alternative forms of social support and knowledge gathering (Baker & Yang, 2018). Types of support derived from a closed social media group include emotional support and instrumental support, with instrumental support (i.e., information sharing) being both informal (e.g., personally gleaned experiential wisdom) and formal (e.g., professional sources or guidelines). Of the two types of support offered through closed social media groups, emotional support appears to be most prevalent (Baker & Yang, 2018; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). Groups provide women with a source of support for dealing with frustration, stress and distress related to relationships, parenting, life circumstances, and personal sources of distress (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). Online communities, especially Facebook groups, appear to be more convenient than more formal online support groups, in particular for young mothers (Holtz et al., 2015).

Group Composition

While online groups offer information, entertainment, peer support and a sense of community, social media also affords opportunities for trolling, backlash, and criticism (Herring et al., 2002). Finding the right group of like-minded, respectful, and supportive people is not easy. However, when the right fit is found, such groups can offer instrumental and emotional support, foster a sense of belonging, reduce feelings of isolation, and offer diverse perspectives (Naslund et al., 2016). Online groups can also connect similar users across vast geographical distances (O'Dea & Campbell, 2011) and can do so while affording objectivity and a sense of relative anonymity that may be required for vulnerable discussions about sexuality (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). Appropriate support for women experiencing sexual difficulties may be found in private online groups that foster respectful, open conversation about sensitive topics associated with motherhood.

Not all groups are equal. In his reference text on group psychotherapy and group formation, Yalom describes several factors that contribute to the success of a group (Yalom & Leszcs, 2005). These include altruism, interpersonal learning input and output, guidance, family re-enactment, catharsis, cohesion, universality, identification, self-understanding, instillation of hope, and existential factors. Though online groups are more informal and are not considered psychotherapy groups, they offer structure for many of these valuable group exchanges. In studies examining the importance of these factors, *cohesion* is most frequently reported by group participants to be the central factor that seems to facilitate the others (Bernard, Burlingame, Flores, et al. 2008). *Cohesion* is the sense of belonging in the group, including feeling understood and accepted. If groups don't include some similarity in the demographics or in identification of group members, there is likely to be less connection and disclosure amongst group members. While motherhood itself is a strong factor likely to create cohesion, identification may be enhanced with other sources of similar interests or values. Additionally, *universality,* which is understood to be the sense of not being the only person with such experiences, may foster cohesion.

In my personal observation, being a member of several online closed communities, I have found that the more similar the group, the higher cohesion—as evidenced by unsolicited comments from group members about the value of the community in comparison to others. The most successful groups I have been a part of are those in which all members have similar interests such as those who follow the same parenting approach, fitness program, have children of the same age, have the same professional background, or are members of the same community (e.g., geographic area, religious affiliation, career path).

My Experiences Navigating Motherhood and Sexuality

As a clinical psychologist, specializing in sexual health, I regularly have intimate and private conversations with mothers about their sexual health concerns. However, the women who ultimately end up in my office are a unique subset of people. These are women who are concerned about sexual changes, who are aware that help exists, and who have moved past the barriers to accessing care to find themselves in 'sex therapy.' So many mothers will never have the privilege of accessing care in this way. Quality sexual health care is simply not available to everyone, as specialty care differs by region, is cost-prohibitive, and can have long wait times. But even where it is accessible, many people will not access it because they are unaware of it, or because they are too embarrassed to seek it out.

In my own experience as a new mother, I had good information about what to expect with regards to sexuality and pelvic health changes, but I still learned new things in experiencing them firsthand. While I had a team of colleagues around me (e.g., nurse practitioners, gynecologists, fellow psychologists) and also my own friends and fellow mothers with whom to consult, I still felt somewhat reserved when the questions I was asking were about my vaginal health and not my patient's. Nevertheless, I try to practice the same advice I offer to my patients, which includes having the difficult conversations that work to break down stigma and build confidence, so I asked anyway. I learned firsthand about treatments for vaginal atrophy following prolonged breastfeeding, which included use of topical vaginal estrogen, and about applied strategies to reduce sexual discomfort, including using lubricants and altering sexual practices. I learned about the impact of adjusting sexual experiences in the context of sleepless nights and exhaustion. I learned that there are many valid reasons not to have sex when you are a new parent. I also knew that sex was important and wanted to resume activities and minimize the challenges that potentially lay ahead.

I shared information with my expectant parents' class about the need for sexual lubricant when resuming sexual activity, and about how to buy a good quality one. I encouraged friends to explore sexual aids or toys alone and with their partner(s) to figure out new kinds of sexual stimulation that worked for them. I signed up for pelvic floor physiotherapy to address my own low back and pelvic pain, and I told my friends and family all about it. For a sexual health clinician these actions may seem intuitive, but in having these conversations, it was abundantly clear that these are difficult tasks for most.

How Can Online Groups Offer Support Related to Sexuality?

As a sexuality and relationship psychologist, I encourage my clients to think about the various sources of influence in their lives. We all form beliefs and expectations about ourselves, about other people, and the world (Beck, 1976) which begin formulating from our early days as infants. We have a lifetime of influences of what it means to be a mother, a worker, an academic, a partner, and a woman, including expectations about how to balance these multiple roles.

In my own experience as part of several online groups for mothers, I have observed women come together to support each other in profound ways. While I certainly contributed my knowledge, expertise, and support to my group members, I might dare say that my professional insights did not stand out as a unique contribution. These women, equipped with their own rich experiences, perseverance, wisdom, and fortitude, all showed up for each other in incredible ways. They shared resources (e.g., books, articles, medications, health care consultations) along with their own personal stories (e.g., including challenges such as frustrations related to low desire or painful sex, or successes such as finding a satisfying sexual toy, or negotiating better sexual experiences with their partner), all while actively listening and offering encouragement and validation of each other's experiences. The following are some examples of content areas that I have seen explored in my own capacity as a group member in several private online communities.

Advice and Celebration of Pelvic Floor Physiotherapy

Pelvic floor physical therapy is a specialized type of physiotherapy in which attention is directed to the pelvic anatomy. The pelvic floor is the group of muscles that support internal pelvic organs and is composed of all the muscles, connective tissues, and organs that are housed in the pelvic canal (Ashton-Miller & DeLancey, 2009). The pelvic floor helps facilitate bladder, bowel, and sexual activity. During the postpartum period, many mothers experience a variety of physiological changes that create difficulty in adjustment. These include but are not limited to hypertonicity of the pelvic floor (i.e., muscle tightness) and hypotonicity of the pelvic floor (i.e., muscle weakening), both of which can be related to experiences of urinary incontinence, constipation, and pelvic or vaginal pain or discomfort. Most of the people that I counsel have never heard of pelvic floor physiotherapy, and when they come to understand that a significant aspect of the treatment can involve internal pelvic assessment and adjustment, many are understandably reticent to follow through. When one mother can speak of the direct benefits of this treatment to her life, it can offer the encouragement required to move a reluctant mother from contemplation to action in commencing treatment.

How Groups can Offer Support While much of the appeal of group-based online support is having a place to ask questions, share concerns and garner support, another feature of the group environment is to share knowledge with others and celebrate successes. In my practice, I routinely encounter people who have never heard of pelvic floor physical therapy and the many benefits it has for all people with pelvic concerns, and more specifically those related to birthing babies. Even amongst those who have heard of pelvic floor physical therapy, it can seem a little daunting. While physiotherapists can offer education and support, a very valuable service they offer is internal assessment and treatment. Often perceived as an invasive treatment, many patients are hesitant to try it. Hearing from others how life changing their treatment experience is, and how normal it is to need treatment, encouraged patients to take the next step to enroll.

Normalization of Reduced Sexual Desire and Sexual Frequency

An important component of maintaining interest in sex is that sexual experiences are positive and rewarding (Basson, 2005). The Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers, 1995) provides a model to understanding sexual motivation. Participants weigh the rewards and costs associated with each sexual experience. Outcomes that are emotionally or physically gratifying and pleasurable are considered rewards. Outcomes associated with pain, embarrassment, or anxiety, or those that are considered to require physical or mental effort are considered costs (Lawrance & Byers, 1995). When rewards exceed costs, the more satisfying the experience will be. In the context of new motherhood, it is hard to imagine a sexual scenario that doesn't require some degree of effort; barriers abound. Competing demands for attention, mental and physical energy, and privacy are high. Sleep is hindered, fatigue is profound, body image concerns abound, and mental health issues such as postpartum depression and anxiety are common. Such challenges are not contextual factors that protect or facilitate of sexual interest. In short, costs are high and while rewards may still be present, it's common for the balance of the cost: reward ratio to have tipped in the negative direction.

Many mothers feel the pressure to get "back to normal" following the arrival of their child. However, the transition to motherhood is transformative, and the idea of "back to normal" may be somewhat of a fantasy. While much of the literature has focused on postpartum impacts on sexuality among new mothers (in the range of immediate to 24 months postpartum), many mothers find that these challenges remain well into child-rearing (Montemuurro & Seifken, 2012). Beyond the previously discussed changes to identities that occur during transition to motherhood, the management of day-to-day responsibilities of raising children and managing households is onerous. While the daunting nature of constant diaper changing and middle-of-the-night feedings dissipates, the responsibilities of parenting never cease. In her pioneering work on division of mental labor in the household, Daminger (2019) concluded that women tend to take on the bulk of the responsibility of the "invisible workload". These tasks, which include anticipating needs, researching solutions, making decisions, and monitoring progress, all disproportionately fall on women, except that of decision making (Daminger, 2019). Arguably, the component of cognitive labor most associated with power and influence was also the most egalitarian. Such work is taxing, and in addition to other adjustments associated with mothering, working, and living life in a stressful world, contributes to relationship dissatisfaction and imaginably also impacts sexual satisfaction.

In a study examining the gender gap in time-use patterns within dual earner heterosexual families, Offer (2011) reported that mothers spend 10 more hours per week than fathers do in managing the household through multi-tasking. In comparison to fathers, who do not report their multitasking to be a negative experience, mothers experience these additional hours negatively, reporting associations with work-family conflict, stress, difficult emotions, and psychological distress (Offer & Schneider, 2011). Interestingly, some evidence-based treatments for low sexual desire and reduced sexual satisfaction posit that some of the difficulty women report in sex may be related to difficulty concentrating on the sexual experience (De Jong, 2009). With all the burden of mental labor that needs to occur and not enough hours in the day, it may be that women have difficulty turning off the "multi-tasking" while having sex.

In their article "Eight days a week…" authors McCutcheon and Morrison (2016) surveyed academic mothers in Canadian Psychology Departments and found that while housework or workplace tasks were similarly reported, childcare responsibility still disproportionately fell to mothers, over fathers, in the order of 10 hours more per week. Work-family conflict was also observed to be greater for academic mothers than fathers (McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016). From a job stress and work-family conflict perspective, mothers reported feeling mentally exhausted, stressed, and anxious trying to balance the dual roles of mother and academic (Bowyer, 2021). From an identity perspective the disproportionate balance in time spent fostering identities of mother (e.g., 10 hours more than their partner in direct childcare) and academic (e.g., "8 days a week"), leaves very little time for anything else, particularly sexuality.

How Groups can Offer Support Women labeled as having "low or hypoactive sexual desire" often seek treatment or suffer silently, thinking that there is something wrong with them. However, when explored in a support group setting, group members can normalize the experience of reduced sexual desire without pathologizing it. This in essence is the *universality* element of Yalom's group factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). While Tardy's (2000) work documented that the conversations mothers were having about sex were presented as jokes about having become an asexual person in motherhood, more realistically, mothers are likely to identify across the spectrum of sexual desire. More specifically, there are those who would be satisfied never having sex again, those who want more (or better) sex than they are currently having, and those who don't "want sex" but rather "wish" that they wanted it. In a survey conducted by ScaryMommy (a popular parenting blog), 63% ($n = 406$) of participant mothers (median age 30–39; median 2 children between the ages of 1–5) reported having sex between 2–3 times per week and 2–3 times per month. Nearly 40% reported that they wished to be having sex between 2 and 3 times per week, 40% described their sex lives as satisfying, 40% also reported that a desire discrepancy with their partner created conflict in the relationship, and 45% reported that a child /children had significantly impacted their sex life. When asked how long they could go without sex, 30% said a few months and 16% said more than a year (Yuko, 2020). The data suggest a possible relationship between higher sexual frequency among mothers and lower household income. In summary, mothers are having sex and report they wish they were having more sex than they are. However, that might be a reality that is difficult to obtain with small children.

In my own observation of online communities supporting each other, I can recall one extremely memorable post. The 2019 post involved an informal survey querying other moms about how often they were having partnered sex. The response categories ranged from "procreation sex only", "seasonally", "less than once/month", "1-2 times per month", "1 time/week", and "several times per week". The two response categories most frequently endorsed were "1–2 times/month" and "seasonally", a response category which I considered profound, as it introduce a relatively infrequent but entirely normative category. In my work as a clinician and sex therapist, people always ask what the right amount of sex is, and I never give a specific answer; the right amount of sex is determined by how both members of a couple feel about it, and by their life circumstances. I often contrast this with the research that suggests that on average Americans tend to have sex approximately 54 times per year (Twenge et al, 2017), with this declines in sexual frequency being more common in people with young children. In this online interaction, real-time responses indicated that a significant proportion of people were engaging in sex "seasonally" (one would suppose that is 3–4 times per year). Of significance, was the normalization of such a vulnerable topic. The group carried on with a very helpful and balanced discussion, presenting both, strategies employed by group members to maintain regular sex, and validation that reduced sexual activity is also acceptable. Strategies included practical adjustments consistent with clinical recommendations for adapting to low sexual desire, such as managing expectations for sex, making sex a priority by scheduling it, moving sexual encounters to daytime hours instead of before bed and communicating boundaries to partners. At the same time, I was impressed with the sensitive discussion that normalized "seasonal" sexual frequency by justifying the many reasons why it's acceptable for sex to decline and by assuring participants there was nothing wrong with couples whose sexual frequency declines, particularly in the context of raising small children. Such reasons included pelvic health difficulty, lengthy menstrual cycles, physical and mental health events, demanding careers, busy times of year, overall exhaustion, and less desire on the part of both partners.

Addressing Painful Sex

Many women have questions about when it's safe or wise to resume sexual activity postpartum. While standard medical practice is to clear women at 6 weeks for resuming vaginal penetrative sexual activity, in actual experience, many women are not yet ready to resume this type of sexual activity, if any. There are many contributors to sexual pain, which may be directly related to pelvic floor health (described above) or other physiological factors such as vaginal health complications from assisted vaginal delivery (e.g., forceps, vacuum) or physiological trauma related to vaginal delivery (third or fourth degree tearing leading to nerve sensitivity and/or scar tissue development, and or pelvic organ prolapse). Sexual function scores are both similarly impaired in mothers who have delivered vaginally as those who have delivered via cesarean section (Ghorat et al., 2017). Mothers who have delivered via cesarean section additionally experience the acute recovery of abdominal surgery and in the case of emergency cesarean section may report additional challenging emotional reactions related to risk and trauma (Yokote, 2008), changes in birth plan and feelings of inadequacy, failure, and disappointment (Kjerulff & Brubaker, 2018). Whether delivery is vaginal or by cesarean section, changes in hormones in the postpartum period can prove difficult to adjust to. Hormonal changes related to breast feeding can result in estrogen deficiency within genital tissues, leading to menopause-like symptoms which contribute to lessened lubrication, and reduced elasticity and/or thinning of tissues in the vagina and vulva. Experiences of painful sex often lead women to expect pain with sex, a phenomenon that not only changes the sexual experience, but can even exacerbate pain (e.g., body tension, bracing, pre-occupation with pain, or catastrophizing; Ambler et al., 2001).

How Groups can Offer Support Online groups offer a safe place to ask questions that often draw out vulnerability. Examples of such questions may include: How did you know you were ready to resume sex? I'm nervous to resume sex, what can I do about it? I had a painful sexual experience, what should I do? What do I do when using lubricant is not enough? How do I cope with changes in the quality of sex? I'm not able to orgasm anymore, how come? How come no one told me I might struggle with resuming sex after having a child?

Many of these questions inherently require admission of lack of knowledge or disclosure of very personal sensitive information; these are not topics typically talked about in a coffee shop, at dinner with friends, or at family holiday gatherings. Without the knowledge that many others are suffering from the same concerns, many women fear that there is something uniquely wrong with them and they are at a loss of where to start seeking solutions. Having a place to voice a concern without worry about judgment from others, or about those in one's social network finding out their private information, frees people to be able to ask questions more candidly. Private groups provide confidential emotional and instrumental support, and not just to the individual making the post. Discussion that ensues in forum-based platforms is also available for review amongst other private community members. This also provides an avenue for observational learning by reviewing other people's questions, experiences, and suggestions. Seeing other people engage in the post by adding their own insights and experiences demonstrates that many other people are also experiencing similar concerns, letting even the silent observers, who have their own queries but do not raise them to the group, to also gain benefits.

Suggestions for treatment that have emerged in these online communities are often extremely helpful and evidence-based. Some of the interactions I have observed involved normalizing conversations with one's doctors and offering recommendations for treatments such as vaginal estrogen and pelvic floor physical therapy. Lastly, the resource that I think is perhaps most helpful when provided woman to woman is the suggestion to modify sexual activities and to communicate directly about this with partners. In my clinical work, I facilitate group therapy for women with sexual concerns. While a routine part of my clinical individual intervention involves encouraging women to examine their assumptions about sex, I routinely find that these are the kinds of interventions that are best conducted in a group setting. As a therapist, I am simply one voice, albeit while I provide an educated opinion; sometimes my formal education means the messages I deliver aren't always perceived to "fit" in the real world. When I offer the suggestions to cease having intercourse if it causes pain, I'm often met with stunned reactions from patients who might say, "My partner would never be okay with that". When group members can share perspectives on how this can be introduced in real life, as well as supportive reactions from partners, it is invaluable and far more meaningful than I could ever provide in 1:1 therapy.

Conclusion

The changing landscape of sources of support for new mothers, including the increasing use of online resources for informal group support, lends unique opportunities for exploring topics that are otherwise difficult to access. Sexuality is still considered taboo in so many social circles that people rarely talk to their friends or family about sexual difficulties. Specifically for academic mothers, demands related to work performance and high job stress are additional challenges that not only increase the likelihood of experiencing sexual difficulty, but also contribute negatively to overall mental health and well-being. Shame, fears relating to lack of privacy, and reluctance to experience vulnerability without assurance of appropriately supportive and trusting communities, often prevent discussion amongst people within shared social networks for fear of others finding out. Academic mothers, as a group, experience unique challenges that are normalized when presented in groups with other academic mothers who are also struggling. Online groups lend anonymity where privacy and safety are offered because of reduced overlap in social or work settings. Bridging geographic barriers, online groups can also connect a large sample of people, with specific identities, increasing the odds of similar issues being described, and shared wisdom becoming accessible. Online communities with sufficient cohesion and engagement offer great potential to provide accessible emotional and instrumental support that is free, and widely accessible on a global scale. Therefore, such communities should be considered as a potential sustainable source of support for mothers who may otherwise feel alone in their suffering from sexual concerns.

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Social Support Theory: Physical Isolation and Academia with Children

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New parents are often told, “babies don’t need much,” but what about the needs of a new mother? New mothers often rely on nearby family and friends for support, advice, rest, and help (Leahy Warren, 2005). What happens when a new mother is located far from family and in a profession that can often be unsupportive of working mothers? Family and friends frequently serve as a social support network providing relationship and support for new mothers (Archer & Kao, 2018). Social support can take

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the form of answering questions, validation, or offering a listening ear (Archer & Kao, 2018). For some, the internet has provided a social support network in which to both give and receive support (Archer & Kao, 2018; Stana & Miller, 2019). Indeed, social support theory has expanded to include Online Social Support (OSS), which is a theory that aims to clarify how the internet impacts social support and has been a growing area of research since the early 2000s (House, 1981; LaCoursiere, 2001). We believe examining the application of social support theory to an online group of parents (in this case mothers) who self-identify as having a career in an academic setting, who are also at similar stages in child-rearing, will add valuable additional context to the literature on OSS.

Researchers have also examined the importance of online support in conjunction with other offline sources of support (Miyata, 2002; Price et al., 2018; Valtchanov et al., 2014). These studies demonstrated that for many parents, online support that is still based in their local community could be an important way to combat feelings of social isolation. Other researchers of OSS and parenting focused on specific needs, such as support for first-time mothers (Ruthven et al., 2018; Price et al., 2018) or help in areas in which many women struggle, such as breastfeeding support (Cowie et al., 2018; Morse & Brown, 2021; Wagg et al., 2019). Although the bulk of research has focused on dominant, common themes for groups, such as first-time mothers or nursing issues, there are also many online groups that are centered around the year of childbirth, profession, child developmental status, location, or any other of a host of traits.

One such group focused on mothers in academia with children of a similar age. This group was selected because its narrow focus meant it was relatively small, quite active, and likely to include interview candidates meeting the research criteria. Additionally, there are many participants in the group who experience geographic isolation; they are geographically distant from family and friends who might usually provide support during new motherhood. Such groups are especially important, because researchers have found that academia can be isolating as an early career researcher, invalidating for pregnant people, and unhelpful, specifically for mothers with newborn children (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019). Furthermore, academia as a career frequently requires moving to a new city, state or even country, thus creating geographic distance from social and family support. This can also be thought of as physical isolation from family support—the characteristic of being removed from the physical location of the family.

By simulating the connection and collective wisdom of extended family support networks, an online group can draw upon a potentially larger and more diverse set of parenting perspectives than could be attained in a conventional setting. In this sense, different online groups created for parents in isolating and difficult careers are meeting a need for support, as outlined and described in social support theory. Social support refers to the resources and networks that help an individual or group through issues or problems (Thoits, 2011), and can include emotional, informational, tangible, and appraisal support (House, 1981). A hallmark of social support theory is the impact of positive relationships on a person's health, happiness, and outlook (Hupcey, 1998; Sarason & Sarason, 1985). The internet's ability to connect users to provide asynchronous support to new mothers in a digital space such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram directly fulfills such needs for social support for new mothers, particularly those who are in isolated locations and in unsupportive career fields. While social support theory's application to motherhood has been studied, there is limited evidence exploring its wider application in online settings for specific career fields. Specifically, academic career settings are unique in their common requirements for travel, full-time work, and a demanding schedule to reach tenure status (Canetto et al., 2017). Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap in its examination of the ways in which academic parents use online support to cope in the absence of conventional extended family support structure.

METHODS

The purpose of this article is to use qualitative data to discuss the following questions:

1. *How was participation in an online academic mothers' group supportive of academic parents without nearby family support?*
2. *What are the applications and nuances of social support theory in supporting geographically isolated, academic mothers?*

To carry out the research questions listed above, data for this study was examined through the lens of social support theory using interviews with participants from an online Facebook group focused on academic motherhood. Phenomenological research analysis (refs) was used in order to capture the richness and nuances of the lived experiences of the interview subjects (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1985). As this study is concerned with how academic mothers in geographic isolation experience social support via online groups, a methodology that reflects the personal nature of the research is appropriate and has provided important details.

A total of eight participants were interviewed. Volunteers who participated were members of an online academic mothers' support group, are academic parents of at least one child of a similar age group (between four or five years of age), and living in geographic isolation from typical support networks. Each interviewee has been assigned a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Participants

We interviewed eight women (see Table 1) who were members of the same online community, identified as academic mothers living in the United States, and with children born in the same calendar year, all five or under. All participants had relocated from their city of origin, either for their own career or for their partner's. For this study, relocation was broadly defined as the moving away from conventional family support for a sustained period of time. Some participants moved within their home country, while others went as far as relocating countries to the United States.

Table 1 Participant demographics by pseudonym

Pseudonym	*Ethnicity*	*Number of Children*	*Marital Status*	*Distance from Family*
Erika	White	1	Married	6+ hours[a]
Devrati	White	1	Married	Intercontinental
Rachel	White	2	Married	Across the United States
Kati	White	2	Married	Intercontinental
Elizabeth	White	1	Married	20 hours[a]
Chantel	White	1	Married	4 hours[a]
Yui	Asian	3	Married	Intercontinental
Phillipa	White	2	Married	14–17 hours[a]

[a] Travel via car

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment Process

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to participant recruitment and data collection. Participants were recruited using a post in a private academic mothers support group with children of a similar age. This post described the title and purpose of the study, participation criteria, as well as the approximate time requirement. We sought to recruit between 6–10 participants in alignment with phenomenological research standards (Guetterman, 2015). Study subjects were not to receive any type of remuneration for their interview.

Participant Selection

Participant recruitment required the inclusionary criteria firstly to be that at the time of the study, that they identified as an “academic” which we defined as including positions such as (a) full-time teaching faculty (b) adjunct professors, (c) academic staff, postdoctoral fellows, or (d) research faculty. Our second criterion was that they identified as being geographically isolated from traditional support systems. Institutional Review Board permission was granted allowing us to begin recruiting participants. We recruited within an online social support group that was restricted, and as a result, our participant selection was restricted to those who self-identified as “mothers.”

Volunteers who self-identified as meeting the participation criteria commented on the post and they were contacted through direct messages. Ten volunteers initially commented on the post for inclusion in the interviews. Those volunteers who did not respond to initial direct messages were also contacted through university emails as found through a Google search. Of the original ten volunteers, nine people scheduled an interview and eight people were interviewed. One of the people who had scheduled an interview had to cancel and did not respond to requests for rescheduling. Prior to giving the interviews, all participants were provided with informed consent documents that detailed the limitations of confidentiality and other benefits and risks associated with participation that they signed. All participants who were scheduled for interviews and signed informed consent documents then completed the study and saturation was reached after interviews were completed, requiring no further participants to be recruited. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were all conducted within one month.

DATA COLLECTION

We collected data from participants utilizing semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1) as they provided some format and touch on some of the hallmarks of social support theory, but left room for the interviewee to elaborate. Semi-structured interviews are an appropriate methodology as they allow the interview subject's views to be shared in their own words (Kallio et al., 2016).

Recording and Data Transformation

Each interview was conducted using the web application, Zoom, during which the interview was recorded. Upon conclusion of the interview, the audio recording of the interview was saved and transcribed using the app Live Transcribe. The resulting transcription was checked for accuracy against the audio recording by the interviewer.

ANALYSIS

Interview data was organized by type of support provided due to the structure of the interview questions. Each of the three types of support were explored with their own line of questioning, thereby siloing the relevant data for analysis. Other interview themes emerged more organically, such as parenting during a pandemic or being able to use the relative anonymity of the online group to ask and answer delicate questions. Such themes and supporting data warranted their own discussion and exploration within the results.

Methodological Integrity

The data provided by the interviews provides a diverse set of experiences and perspectives surrounding the value of online support for mothers who are geographically distant from familiar support. Participants represented a variety of fields of scholarship, subjects from both international and domestic backgrounds, those with multiple and single children, as well as urban and rural inhabitants. Researcher perspectives were limited in the data collection process by using one interviewer for all of the interviews and using a predefined set of questions for each interview. Similarly, by structuring the interview questions so that each type of support was distinctly discussed, separate from the others, the researcher perspectives were limited. The interview questions invited consideration of each support topic separately to reduce the likelihood of researcher misinterpretation. Findings for this study are grounded in evidence through the use of direct quotes from participants and they provide support for the specific context of the academic mothers' experiences.

Results

The interviews yielded several key themes that expand our understanding of OSS in several critical ways. The first theme we found was that mothers often posted seeking advice for everyday parenting problems, from medical questions to issues with education. Others posted in more unusual or work-related situations, in cases where they were unsure what to do and had limited community support. For example, I (Laura), have asked multiple questions of the community revolving around issues dealing with daycares like requesting advice for how to respond to their concerns and seeking confirmation (or a rebuttal) that behaviors I was seeing were inappropriate. I (Diane) have been delighted to find that members of the group are so generous. When a member is having an emergency and in need of financial assistance, group members will not hesitate to send money to the individual needing help. Second, the interviews demonstrated that the online community was an important space for women to be vulnerable and open with peers they felt would understand. Third, the interviews demonstrated the ways in which online communities often translate into offline community support as well. This type of support can include financial support, members meeting up in the same city, or the organization of a gift exchange around holidays. Finally, the interviews demonstrated the increased importance of this form of online social support during the intense social isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews thus revealed the broad variety in types of social support provided, including emotional, informational, and tangible support.

PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES: PROVIDING AND RECEIVING SUPPORT

Emotional Support

Interviewees shared that the online community became a source of emotional support. Yui made this clear in her interview, stating that she posts big issues or events in her life, as well as sharing information about herself and family. Like other interviewees, Yui stated that her sharing of her own experiences was for her a way to provide support to others and as a gesture of emotional support. In addition to sharing her experiences, especially if she felt her own experiences were not relevant, she often shares reactions as a way to indicate solidarity and let a poster know they have support, especially in a difficult situation. This type of online support and sharing of experiences was particularly important to Yui, who noted that online academic support groups fulfill a need that would not be met even if she lived closer to in-person support, as there are no other academics in her family.

For these women, the act of liking and "silent" support or solidarity was an important part of social support provided online. As Elizabeth said, the rapid responses from group members to posts meant that the group was "a form of emotional support to know that you're not alone… people on the group are offering more than just information, they're offering solidarity." Phillipa echoed this sentiment, stating that the group "feels like a safe, supportive, validating space, where people have each other's backs and can give useful feedback when it is warranted."

During the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic, several group members also started weekly synchronous online meetings as a way to increase support and socialization. These online calls that participants shared is one way the group created a unique system of support online. But the evolution of the online group overall has also been an unusual point of support, as another participant, Devrati, made clear when she shared that she had participated in the mother's group longer than any other group, noting that the emotional support provided by this particular group grew and changed as her needs evolved: "The emotional support has… transformed and broadened as I think also my own focus has broadened… there's a lot of solidarity that's continued, the conversation has continued, but there has been a broadening of… accessing of the group in terms of what it was able to offer" as the children of the parents in the group aged.

Several participants mentioned that the group provided emotional support where parenting is concerned. Specifically, reading posts about a child's difficult behavior and feeling similarly challenged with their own child helped them to feel emotionally supported as parents and less alone, despite their isolation from family and friends. As Phillipa explained: "You know, the group is particularly helpful because not everybody's kids are exactly the same age but it's a cohort going through stuff… It's validating to see other people's kind of struggles with their kids." Elizabeth echoed this perspective by explaining that "[the group] shows me almost every day that I'm not alone in whatever struggle or phase is happening. I don't feel like an outlier… So, yeah, definitely it's a form of emotional support to know that you're not alone and I think, you know, people in the group are offering more than just information, they're offering solidarity."

Both Phillipa and Elizabeth contrasted their feelings of being emotionally supported by the online group with other local neighborhood "mom groups" where racism, misinformation, and political and social divisions could be present, and where participants could be "persnickety." As Elizabeth explained, "you know, these are all really highly educated women who I feel like I can trust their judgment." I (Kathryn) also turned to this group rather than local support networks for emotional support after a traumatic event even though local mothers would be more familiar with resources and support available in the country I am in, in part because the group was able to recommend resources and support that I felt comfortable using with my children.

Informational Support

Participants in the mothers' group we interviewed highlighted the importance of the group as a source of informational support. The interviewees often noted that the academic background of members of the group created a safe space to seek information that aligned with their beliefs and values that the local communities around them might not share. As Yui explained, "So I think there's informational support in the specific way of like, how do you balance a demanding academic career with, you know, child care. And so I think there's informational support specific to the group, which is harder to find elsewhere. So the other, the first two kinds

I can get from, you know, moms in my neighborhood or whatever. I think the third one is a little bit harder to come by. So I think that that's been very valuable."

At the same time, other interview participants noted the limitations of emotional support provided by online groups, with Chantel saying the group was "not the most satisfying or full source of emotional support. I tend to feel that way more when I am with people, like in a real way I guess." She went on to point out, however, that online support groups are still a great source of relief "just to share questions to get… many responses from a community of people that are very similar to me. It's really helpful to me and emotionally for sure." For participants like Chantel, then, online groups provided a source of informational support, a way to seek advice or share experiences from peer groups in a similar situation. Chantel also noted that she also provides emotional support and tries to be a "positive presence" and "give support:" "I always respond when I see, there's a post that… hasn't gotten any responses for a few hours. Like if I see it, I like to sort of make a comment… just to make sure everyone's getting, you know, visibility and everyone feels, you know, like their issues are… appropriate for the group and can be answered by someone in the group."

The group was also often a source of information the interviewees trusted, a factor mentioned by almost all of the interviewees. Chantel echoed this sentiment, adding that knowing all the women in the group had a high level of formal education helped her with trusting the information shared than if it were offered by a local mother's group: "So for me I need like a slightly more legitimate source… you know, knowing that they all have kids exactly my kids age and also they all have at least at one point pursued a PhD… those things give me more confidence and in the discussions saying this." Another interviewee, Erika, highlighted the advantage of having many group participants with different backgrounds and expertise, allowing the participants to draw upon each other's knowledge: "I was talking a lot in there about all the covid information that I have gotten from this group. And again, like it's information, I could trust. Information especially from like the moms with science backgrounds that I probably wouldn't come across or understand." I (Laura) agree with this sentiment, and have often expressed that being in a group full of academics means you know that, for the most part, people are doing research and looking at literature to support their advice and feedback.

Interviewees' ability to trust other mothers was also a result of getting to know the character and personalities of the different group members, and the longevity of the group as a whole. As Devrati explained: “And it’s a trust that is years in the making…because you’ve seen these people talking about things and sharing their perspectives for years, at this point. In other words, informational support was facilitated by shared values, knowledge about the levels of expertise of the group participants, and deep trust and relationships established over time.”

Tangible Support

One of the hallmarks of physical communities is its tangible, or physical, social support. Devrati pointed out the broad range of tangible support provided by the online group, noting that she had received clothes, books, and toys from connections in the online group. She added that further tangible support included “peer-reviewed analysis and recommendations that are really tangible things for children’s toys, books, for all my classes… [or of things] that I have purchased… for self-care regimens, using consumer products like skin care… or clothing… and shoes. …that would be tangible to me too because whether they were given to me or not, these recommendations have improved, I would say, vastly my material existence in small and less small ways.” In addition to the examples Devrati provides, other interviewees noted that tangible support was also provided when group members met in person, provided financial support, or exchanged gifts.

Tangible support also included the provision of funds for members facing unexpected expenses. For example, Phillipa cited examples of the group raising funds for fellow members, and Kati, Yui, Chantel, and others said they donated funds to members in need of support. Erika stressed the importance of what Kati called “mutual aid spirit of our people” as a recipient of this aid in the wake of a medical emergency: “the moms did come together and donated a really significant amount of money that went towards my ridiculous medical bill. And that was… beautiful and amazing.”

Chantel and Elizabeth further expressed the importance of the group in that it connected them to another academic parent who moved to their respective areas. During the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2019, Chantel said that she and the parent she met in the online group exchanged crafts and “traded toys to let each other’s kids borrow.” Elizabeth noted that when a member of the group moved to her area, they became friends through bicycle rides and hikes, and they have continued to socialize together with their children.

Tangible support also took the shape of connecting mothers with resources. Rachel recounted how another group participant located in the same city managed to enroll her autistic daughter in a trial when she was 12 months old, and that "the only reason that happened is because of this academic mama in the 2017 group who, who was like the right person at the right time to tag us into the right resources… and really went to bat for us."

In some cases, the tangible support has taken the form of a broader social network: when the mothers travel, they sometimes connect and meet for lunch or an event. Elizabeth said, "I'm currently traveling and I'm currently with family for the first time in three years and there are academic mamas that I know are in this location from the online group that I'm going to reach out to and see if we can play with the kids in person. But it's something like if I were in any part of the world where I know one of these women were, I would reach out and I would feel super comfortable having an in-person meeting and I would feel ecstatic like these are friends, and that's nothing I ever expected."

Chantel and Elizabeth also provided mentorship to other women in the group who were in similar fields, offering advice and engaging in collaboration with other women in the group. Indeed, this present research and book chapter is also an example of tangible collaboration borne out of the group: not only are the interviewees all members, but the authors also connected in the same online group. Kati also highlighted the importance of tangible career support, when she said, "I was recently trying to put together a presentation and asked for sources that people… readily shared." I (Laura) have also received tangible support in my academic career, when I asked for volunteers of those who had recently completed their dissertations to come and speak as part of a panel to my doctoral level students. I had more volunteers than I could include, even with it being just a 24-hour notice. Thus, a group specifically for academic mothers fulfilled needs for tangible professional support as well as for parents, and as Devrati pointed out, the spectrum of tangible aid the group meets is broad indeed.

Online Communities Mitigate In-Person Social Support Network Gaps

The interview responses highlighted some of the ways online communities for specific populations provided support in particular from mothers who are geographically isolated from their communities. For Yui, an important aspect is a space that offers freedom from other roles: "intimacy yet anonymity…anonymity in the sense that you know it won't feed back to your real life… in real life, in physical life, I play roles, right? I'm a professor. I'm a mother. I'm a neighbor… and… at least in the academic moms group I don't have a role that I have to fulfill… that I have to physically fulfill so I don't have to reflect upon if I say this, does it have an impact on the role?… And I think that sort of anonymity has been extremely helpful. That I am nothing but a member of the group. I'm not fulfilling a role… that sort of detachedness from my life roles has been really helpful for sure." Elizabeth makes a similar point: "You don't have to build up relationships. You also can feel OK not interacting with it for six months or a year, taking a Facebook break. Knowing it's there to come back to… you don't have to invest in it upfront in the same way, I guess."

Phillipa expressed a similar idea, discussing the time and energy required to make and maintain friendships with children, and stating, "And so online is a space where people can, like, be themselves, and be honest and share more intimate details… It takes a long time to do that with real-life friends. That and parenting makes it hard to do and academic obligations may get in the way. I can fit it in online between meetings, I could be on Facebook for fifteen minutes… Just stuff that's happening in people's lives. That feels very real. And I can connect to that in small moments where I have time. That's just not how things work when you make friends in the real world."

In addition, when Erika faced a particularly difficult situation, she turned to the group because, "I didn't want to talk to people in person because I couldn't talk without crying, but I could text about it, or I could post about it… and still receive the support I needed." Indeed, many mothers also highlighted the fact it was easier to share intimate situations online. Engaging in an online community also provided a way to ask personal questions about children, as Rachel noted, "You know, especially, I've been posting about my daughter with special needs. It's easier. I find it easier to post in an online academic community than even… in a local community, or talking to people about it because I want to give my kids that anonymity." This ability to share intensely personal information that they could not share in their offline communities because of its sensitivity was also highlighted by Elizabeth: "talking about prolapse after birth and like pelvic physical therapy is probably something I wouldn't have talked with my mother about… but it's something that I could openly talk about with an online academic, women's group and feel zero need to censor myself at all." Finally, Chantel shared how helpful she had found group discussions about IVF, not just as women who may have experienced it but also from an academic perspective: "I just love to see some random question from one of the other moms and then, you know, someone says, oh, I research that." For mothers in academia who are parenting far from their offline communities, the online community not only filled social support needs, but also filled gaps that offline communities couldn't provide.

Social Support and the Pandemic

For mothers already parenting far from traditional support communities, and working in academic fields, the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic was indeed life-changing, and many respondents highlighted that the online community was a source of immeasurable social support for women already feeling some degree of isolation. As Elizabeth said, "I think there was just an even deeper form of emotional support that a lot of us reached into and needed because of the pandemic." In communities where beliefs about COVID-19 prevention measures and vaccines differed, the online group provided a safe space to connect with mothers who had similar perspectives, and who could help shoulder some of the emotional burden caused by the pandemic. As Erika described, "And then during the pandemic there was also the sense of *these* are my people who are also worried about the long-term consequences and who have similar risk tolerance and who have similar concerns about their child and keeping their child safe. And yeah, so there was again that tightening of emotional support and commiseration."

For Kati, the group became a way to share her feelings of isolation, heightened by the pandemic: "I was about to give birth to my second child. And my parents weren't allowed to enter the country at the time. … I picked my older child up from daycare and at the same time, grandparents of another child picked up another child, and it was literally three days before I ended up giving birth. So my hormones were at an all-time high and I literally had to turn around to cry because I just… missed them for my child, for myself. And I remember sharing that and like knowing that everybody could, or lots of people could, relate to that, it wouldn't require extensive explanation and would be a safe place to share that."

Informational and tangible support also shifted during COVID-19, with mothers asking questions about the virus, prevention measures, and vaccinations. Kati noted, "the decision between a Pfizer or Moderna vaccine for my under-five-year-old is absolutely something that I trust the members of the group to give input into." Similarly, Rachel highlighted the accuracy of the information shared in the group, and that the group "has really been on it in terms of where we are in approval for vaccines, or you know what the protocols should be if somebody gets exposed… and so I feel like the information that has come through has been correct." I, (Floriza), agree with this sentiment, and the group became the first place where I would seek information about COVID-19, as well as emotional support when I struggled with the lack of masking and vaccination mandates in the country where I am living.

Social Support Theory and Geographically Isolated, Academic Mothers

The online group provided emotional support, informational support, and other forms of support that women could not get in their daily lives from regular support networks because academia is such a niche area. As Erika stated, "I think [the group] has really helped my own imposter syndrome, and the same with mothering," and Devrati also noted that when her child was young, "it was so crucial in the early years in helping me feel competent as a parent and as a mother." Furthermore, for the women interviewed, as Erika said, an online group of women in similar positions "has definitely helped me understand that positioning [as an academic and as a mother] for myself, and shape that, and kind of shape how I do that intersection." Several women highlighted the importance of the diversity of the group, as Devrati described the benefits of the group: "… understanding a new context, culturally, and socially, and materially, understanding social norms… and having a space to ask questions that is non-judgemental…" Thus, for the women we interviewed, the social support provided by the online community helped them shape their identities as academics and mothers.

Discussion and Conclusion

While this study includes a number of limitations such as a small number of self-selected interviewees, a single group as the source of online support looked at, and a focus on the relatively limited field of academia as a source of geographic isolation for parents, there are broader implications for our results. First, our study clarified the multiple ways participation in an academic mother's group was supportive of academic parents in emotional, informational, and tangible ways. It further demonstrated the nuances of social support theory in supporting geographically isolated, academic mothers in a number of ways. For example, our results demonstrated the linkages between online and offline social support, with in-person meet-ups for conferences or relocation to areas near other group members being mentioned. In this sense, an academically oriented group of mothers allowed for this kind of fluidity in ways that purely anonymous mothers' message boards or groups based in local communities might not, in that relocation and travel for research or academic conference participation are a part of the careers we have chosen. Further attention to fluidity through the lens of social support theory between online and offline support, and how this might translate to other fields that have high rates of relocation or conferences, such as medical professions, would shed further light on this phenomenon.

In addition, this study demonstrated the importance of online communities for parents in socially isolating careers who may be living in isolation from traditional sources of support. It identified the ways in which online communities are an important source of emotional, informational, and tangible support as identified by social support theory and online social support theory for mothers. It also demonstrated the way a community that begins online can become an offline source of support as well. Finally, it breaks new ground in demonstrating the amplified importance of social support online and new ways of engagement for socially isolated parents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Appendix 1

1. To get started, could you please introduce yourself? What is your name, where do you currently live, how old are your children?
2. What is your current position? Can you add anything about what your work entails and about your work environment?
3. Would you describe yourself as "isolated" from family in your current location?
4. What was the reason you moved to your current location?
5. Are you a member of any online groups?
6. Out of the online groups in which you are a member, how would you describe your participation? (lurker, active participant, etc.,) Can you give some examples of how you participate?

7. Does being isolated from your family impact your participation in online groups? If so, can you provide some explanation?
8. Do you believe your online participation in academic mothers' groups to be a source of emotional support to you and others as both a parent and an academic? Can you give some examples of emotional support you have given or received?
9. Do you believe your online participation in academic mothers' groups to be a source of tangible support to you and others as both a parent and an academic? Can you give some examples of tangible support you have given or received?
10. Do you believe your online participation in academic mothers' groups to be a source of informational support to you as both a parent and an academic? Can you give some examples of informational support you have given or received?
11. Do you believe your online participation in academic mothers' groups to be a source of support to you in how you view your own position as both a parent and an academic? Can you give some examples of support that has helped shape how you view your own position that you have given or received?
12. What are some benefits to being in an online parents' community when you are geographically isolated from family support?
13. Is there any kind of support that you have received from an online community that you do not think you could receive from a physically close, supportive community? (problems where anonymity or physical distance might actually encourage vulnerability/openness)
14. Is there any kind of support that you have been unable to receive from an online community, the lack of which has impacted your health or wellbeing?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share with us today?

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PART III

Pandemic Parenting

Building Welcoming Spaces on Social Media: Motherhood in Academia During a Pandemic and Beyond

Jordana N. Navarro and Maria João Lobo Antunes

Opportunities available to women have perhaps improved throughout the years, especially if we examine various indicators like employment, income, or percentage in poverty, but the reality is that the overall social structure continues to advantage men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; U.S. Department of Labor, 2020; Yellen, 2017). To compound this problem, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges to social life—particularly in the academy via shifting teaching, researching, and conducting service to online platforms. Coupled with these challenges, academics with children had to balance childcare and homeschooling, which data indicate was largely shouldered by women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). COVID-19 merely

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served to highlight and widen academic gender disparities, aggravating an existing socio-cultural structure that disadvantages women both in and outside of the academy, extending into their personal lives and their own homes (United Nations Women Headquarters, 2020). Women faculty outnumber men faculty in non-tenure track and part-time positions (Finkelstein et al., 2016), non-tenure-track and part-time positions; and, even if a tenure-track position is secured, they are less likely to attain full professorship (AAUP, 2022). Studies have addressed professional hurdles women must overcome, yet women must also contend with what is, not so affectionately called, the "child penalty" (e.g., Baker, 2010). The "child penalty" compounds disadvantages that are experienced by women academics; for example, they tend to publish comparatively less (Kyvik & Teigen, 1996; Lutter & Schröder, 2020), and women in academia "including those who are mothers, tend to take on a larger load in teaching and service compared to their male counterparts," (Vomvoridi-Ivanovic & Ward, 2021: 46–47), which adds to already difficult journey women face (Chen & Zimbler, 2002; Guarino & Borden, 2017). Further, studies suggest that stopping the tenure clock during parental leave is seen negatively during tenure deliberations, particularly for women (Vomvoridi-Ivanovic & Ward, 2021). Vomvoridi-Ivanovic and Ward (2021) share that "faculty, including academic mothers, describe having a second child during tenure earning years as 'tenure suicide'" (pg. 45).

Yet one of the benefits of the widespread accessibility and availability of technology is that while COVID-19 spawned additional hardships for women, we could leverage the time already spent online amidst lockdowns and remote working to connect, forge meaningful relationships, and shift social activities to new and exciting spaces. To that end, this chapter describes our personal experiences (as cisgender women, one who grew up in a different country, the other American) of using Discord (a social media platform that focuses on instant messaging) and Twitter to connect and support each other as we face and overcome professional and personal obstacles, some endemic to the very patriarchal nature of our work as professors, others emerging from a pandemic that has destroyed so many lives. It should also be noted that Jordana is extroverted, while Joan is a social introvert, but we both enjoy and seek out connections with others; though, readers should keep in mind that our "guild" in Discord eventually came to comprise people with all sorts of personalities. In fact, from our perspective, that is a strength of Discord and online social spaces:

individuals can interact to the degree they feel comfortable with as life circumstances permit.

Before describing those experiences, it is important to note that this chapter is about our experiences via *these platforms* and not a critique of the platforms themselves. As widely known and reported on, social media platforms can be especially toxic spaces for women; women are more likely to experience cyber-sexual harassment and are more likely to report that unwanted encounters had severe negative impacts on their mental wellbeing (Duggan, 2017). We recognize our positionality and our privilege as cisgender white women and acknowledge our experiences are unique to us. We wish, however, that the hope we have found in these online spaces translated to opportunities where individuals of differing backgrounds can connect and form meaningful relationships.

Twitter as the Gate to Friendship

Fun fact: we have never formally met, or hung out, yet. At the last meeting of the American Society of Criminology (ASC), in 2019 P.P. (pre-pandemic) we connected during a teaching seminar hosted by the Division on Women and Crime. Jordana and Dr. Clevenger moderated the workshop brilliantly. The attendance was diverse, the crowd engaged, and the information shared, amazing. We spoke briefly about Jordana's pedagogical books, and she invited attendees to reach out, so she could mail us a copy of her most recent book.

We connected in full on Twitter. We bonded over our love for pedagogical innovation and being mothers within the academy. We both became mothers in graduate school and had grown accustomed to the demanding realities of motherhood in the academy, which included progressing through rigorous academic degrees (e.g., comprehensive examinations, graduate teaching, publications) and securing academic positions, all while experiencing the joys and worries associated with caring for young humans. In getting to know each other, we recognized that our connection was grounded in the reality that many of our academic friends neither have nor wanted children and although we absolutely adore our childless friends and at times envy them, we could relate to each other on a deeper level because our struggles were immediately understood.

Our friendship began on Twitter. The wonder of Twitter is that it is mostly public, which means content is shared with a wide range of people and there is largely no approval process like private Facebook groups, for example. However, this lack of oversight presents dangers to individuals whose posts and words can quickly be weaponized against them. Indeed, on Twitter, we have noticed that academic moms tend to not share information about their parenting journey and suspect this lack of sharing stems from (at least in part) acknowledgment of the risk of drawing ire about their lack of "focus" on fulfilling their roles as faculty members. This risk and fear are connected to the reality that academia remains a difficult profession for mothers (and, broadly, women) to enter, navigate and progress relative to men.

Even though Twitter and other platforms present risks, there are also networks that are diverse, supportive, and willing to challenge the status quo via multiple methods (e.g., posting quick updates and/or expansive threads, quickly "liking" or "retweeting" to show support). Twitter is also especially suitable for busy professionals that are balancing multiple roles in a day, who may only have a few moments to ask a question or send support to a colleague. For all these reasons, we naturally transitioned to Twitter after ASC, where we continued advocating and supporting each other, as well as many other faculty, under the #crimtwitter hashtag. More specifically, we used this hashtag to share professional news, research, and teaching resources. We had no way of knowing at that point, however, how powerful this space, our friendship, and the #crimtwitter family would be as we weathered the challenges of mothering in academia during a global pandemic.

COVID-19 dramatically altered education, beginning in March 2020 when schools and institutions of higher education transitioned to online spaces. We still recall the misplaced optimism that the shutdown would last a mere two weeks. The reality was much bleaker and devastating. The pandemic turned our Twitter communication into a lifeline, a beacon of solace and hope to turn to, and a rapid exchange of ideas and perspectives, especially from academic moms who were suddenly asked to perform and manage roles they had neither the desire nor the training to do. We became elementary math teachers, raging against the common core (i.e., K-12 curriculum standards, adopted by most states within the United States of America, that were created to ensure career and college readiness; Gewertz, 2015). We were now experts in middle school algebra and armchair therapists for our own students who struggled with many of the same demands imposed on faculty. Conversations during this period (and since) included everything from poop, snot, and rambunctious, energetic kids to how to handle and address difficult work environments given COVID. Sadly, as

COVID and issues related to it (e.g., masks, vaccines, remote teaching) became increasingly politicized and hostile in terms of conversation topics, we added an additional online space (Discord) to converse with each other and academics within the #crimtwitter family we had met via Twitter.

Discord, like Twitter, offered our group—affectionately named "The Professors Guild"—a place where we could still rapidly communicate with each other, but in a closed setting that offered room to be vulnerable and expand. Since entering the space, our one channel of conversation has expanded to many topic areas that revolve around teaching, research, but also babies, cooking, and crafting. Our "guild" has also provided a space for the friendship circle to expand and include our partners, who as non-academics find our profession at the very least bewildering and, at the most, toxic. Indeed, since entering Discord, our "guild" has grown to include twelve faculty members from across the country and six partners/friends met through additional activities. When we proposed this chapter, we were active gamers in World of Warcraft (WoW), and, we are slowly considering going back. We had standing date afternoons at 4 pm and on Wednesday nights. Jordana, the more experienced among us, would critique our gear, outfits and whether our styles matched. Our team mostly consisted of women, with a couple of men joining in the fun. We would talk within Discord and slay beasts in WoW. Our days and nights together earned each of us a series of nicknames, some not safe to share in public and Jordana is grateful for that! We are extremely lucky to have met and connected with each other and the wonderful group of people that now populate our online spaces, but often wonder about how many faculty members (and particularly academic moms) experience their everyday challenges and joys with limited social interaction. Admitting to the difficulties of parenting, exposing the hardship associated with being a parent, particularly a mother in academia, is not easy. Creating a safe space, free from shame and guilt is imperative to the advancement of mothers within the academy and we want others to feel empowered to use their voice, their experience and self in working at being both a badass scholar and parent.

Our interaction at ASC led to friendship that blossomed over Twitter, which spread to likeminded peers. From that environment, we learned about Discord and moved our small community to that platform, where our network continues to thrive and bloom. The message of this chapter is to recognize that despite the toxicity that exists within online spaces, these networks can also be vehicles of connection and growth – one just needs to know where and whom to look for. We are especially interested in sending this message to academic moms, who likely feel the weight of their responsibilities and roles that are ever evolving, coupled with the lack of social support, every day. There are spaces for you and there are people who understand that weight. We are here, we understand, and how can we help you?

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Drafting while Drifting: Developing a Digital Village of Support and Advocacy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Tanya Romero-González, Diane Sabenacio Nititham,
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In this chapter, we present our experiences as academic mothers and primary caregivers in rural Kentucky during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these words we drafted as we helped our children drift to sleep, engaging our pre-pandemic skill of one-handed typing and scrolling on our phones. As lockdown went beyond the two-week "flatten the curve"

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period and we remained isolated from each other, our digital skills became critical, as online platforms became our main method of work, social interaction, academic networking, and advocacy. The pandemic has profoundly impacted—and continues to impact—women academics, especially those with young children, impeding their professional advancement and magnifying the existing gender divide (Minello et al., 2021).

We are three faculty members who work in different departments in the same college, and we were friends prior to the pandemic. Since submitting our initial chapter proposal, we have seen moments of hope during the initial vaccine availability. We have returned to cycles of frustration, despair, and panic as we manage our own and our families' health and university demands with almost no relief. Here, we describe our challenges, and also our digital village(s) of support and advocacy that began in Spring 2020 and continue(s) today as we write in Fall 2021. We have also seen our relationships grow, from good friends to critical lifelines since the initial lockdown.

While our social locations may be unique, our stories speak to the overwhelming pressures to do more with less, as well as feelings of disposability that are common in the neoliberal university (See Poulos, 2017; Saunders & Blanco Ramirez, 2017; Tirelli, 2014). We share our backgrounds to situate ourselves within this growing body of research, including that of academic parenthood (see Gilbert, 2008; Low & Damian Martin, 2019). Tanya is an associate professor of Spanish who migrated from Spain to pursue her graduate studies in the U.S. before joining her department. Her family welcomed a new baby at the beginning of the pandemic while caring for a toddler. Sara is a white cis-gendered assistant professor of English who, at the start of the pandemic, was single parenting a four-year-old with no nearby family. Diane is a Filipina Thai American and the only woman of color in her department. Her family lives in other parts of the U.S. or in Asia, and her spouse's family is in Ireland. She is an associate professor of Sociology and at the time of initial writing, had one toddler at home. Our stories represent our complex identities and, while each of our families are influenced by diverse factors such as transnationalism, multiracialism, or single parenthood, we share the collective experience of being primary caregivers during a time that both our support network and our advocacy efforts had to take a digital form. Due to the demands and restrictions of caregiving, parents have relied heavily on technology as a mode of communication and support. As Orton-Johnson suggests, "[f]or mothers in the Global North, online networks have long been important cultural domains for exchanging information, seeking support and confiding fears" (2021, p. 291). The imposed lockdown meant that the online platforms that had been integral to communicating and finding solidarity in our parenting journeys, became a crucial aspect of our survival—our "lifelines" (2021, p. 291). This digital lifeline was not only used to keep our personal lives afloat but we also used it in our professional roles as executive members of the Women's Faculty Caucus (WFC), a campus advocacy group that addresses equity issues for faculty.

We make our narratives visible through a collaborative autoethnography that combines narratives, diary accounts, letters, text exchanges, images, and other artifacts of our individual and shared experiences. In addition to our personal and vernacular texts, we include our formal recommendations for supporting caregivers which represent the public face of our work. While our interactions and work occurred in an online space, they solidified our bond and anchored us in a time we felt advocacy was vital. Though, as the experiences represented here demonstrate, the line between public and private is often blurred. These fragments allow readers to enter our stories at different points. This systematic and context-specific autoethnographic method allows us to be intentional and rigorous in our inquiry (DeLeon, 2010; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Through collaborative storytelling, represented in multiple modes and genres, we engage in an autobiographical social activity that "disputes the normally held division of self/other, inner/outer, public/private, individual/society, and immediacy/memory" (Sparkes, 2002, p. 216).

We enlist feminist frameworks of narrative inquiry, utilizing different forms of data and storytelling for visibility. Because "events, actions, happenings are also a part of the research and are woven into the stories that are retold" (Trahar, 2009, p. 5), we make visible moments that otherwise remain peripheral through sharing artifacts reflecting our experiences. These artifacts, which carry our felt experiences in material form and real time, are the heart of our collaborative text. We contend that the personal for academic mamas is simultaneously personal, political, classed, raced, and gendered, and cannot be separated from our professional lives—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2018; Pruulmann-Cenverfeldt, 2021). We embrace our "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 2003), translating our invisibilized experiences into nameable embodiments "in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance of life" (2003, p. 25). Additionally, collaborative autoethnography allows us "to study subject areas that would not be as easily and profoundly expressed with other methods" (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 8). Our chapter highlights the crucial role that online spaces played in all aspects of our lives but it also points to how we were forced to take matters into our own hands and do the heavy-lifting, adding what Orton-Johnston has referred to as "digital labor" (2021, p. 292) on to the already heavy burden of the physical and emotional labor of being primary caregivers. By writing and combining our personal stories intertwined with our text messages, family pictures, virtual advocacy writing, and other visual media, we are not only making visible and tangible the seemingly ethereal nature of digital forms of communication but also unearthing the cracked foundation in which neoliberalism and higher education in the United States are built. As such, we are making a call for meaningful action, specifically in the support of faculty caregivers. We have been treading the murky waters of doing our work as primary caregivers and academics while digitally advocating for faculty caregivers at our institution and, although we have managed to keep each other afloat, the need for true allyship must be the anchor that will keep us from drifting away and drowning.

Beginning Our Digital Advocacy: Recommendations for Supporting Caregivers

Well into Fall 2020, our university had no clear or consistent protocols for supporting faculty caregivers, and instead responded to university community requests for clarity and transparency by repeating: "the situation is fluid." We felt this fluidity. As women/mothers/caregivers, we were drowning. There was little flexibility in scheduling, accommodations for parents whose schools were remote or daycares were closed, and adjustments to faculty workloads were at the discretion of department chairs. If prior to the pandemic we had struggled to achieve the elusive myth of attaining the so-called work-life balance, the impossible conundrum of having both our work and personal lives literally occupy the same space tipped the scale. So we held onto our online platforms. In November 2020, we, along with other members of the Women's Faculty Caucus executive team, developed recommendations for supporting caregivers during COVID-19. All of our advocacy work happened digitally. Our team strategized via Zoom, co-crafted emails to university leaders via shared online documents, and updated one another on progress via group texts, texts that were also avenues for sharing stories and offering support.

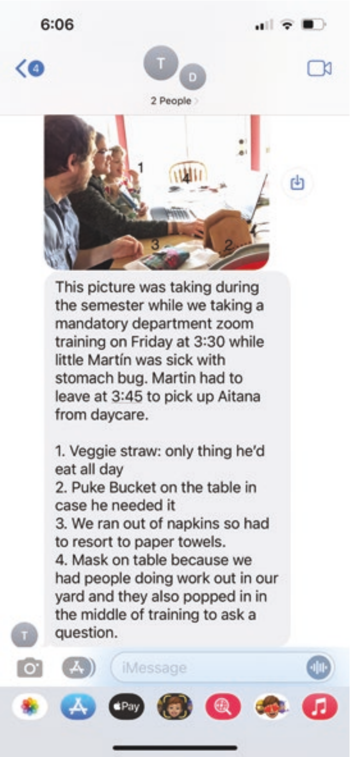
Sometimes we exchanged texts while Zooming with administrators, a means of strategizing in real time. We met online whenever we could find a moment, sometimes for just a couple minutes at time. Like faculty at other institutions who were crafting similar recommendations (Htun, 2020; Malisch et al., 2020; Settles & Linderman, 2020; see also Cohen Miller, 2020), we felt it urgent to state our needs directly and publicly, and to share the abundant research demonstrating the particular burden faced by women faculty and faculty of color. Our document opens:

> It has now been well established that COVID-19 has put significant strain on faculty around the country. Research shows this strain has been felt especially by women and people of color. Last spring, when universities moved all classes online, and daycares and K-12 schools around the country shut their doors, faculty faced considerable increases in workload as they transitioned existing courses to an online format. Many did this work while simultaneously caring for loved ones, including children who were no longer attending school face-to-face. Parents were often tasked with educating their children, while many others struggled to attend to loved ones, including elders, facing illness. Numerous studies point to the fact that women faculty, who are more likely to take on additional caregiving responsibilities than men, have suffered personally and professionally because of these demands. They are publishing less than their male counterparts, are facing increased levels of depression and anxiety, and have been unable to take on leadership roles and other forms of professional participation that advance their careers. Further, people of color are more likely to be facing illness, unemployment, and increased emotional and professional demands due to racism and economic inequality.

We called for university leaders and faculty advocates to "work together to enact concrete measures supporting faculty, and especially caregivers, during this continuing pandemic" with the goal of "increase[ing] and sustain[ing] equity across campus." We identified six areas of need: teaching, research and creativity, service, tenure and promotion, caregiving, and sick leave. Within each category, we delineated concrete recommendations, including flexibility to teach courses or hold office hours online, retroactive pay for those extending tenure clocks (thus foregoing raises), limits on non-essential service, and clearer procedures for taking leave.

During the 2020–21 winter break and into the spring, we met via Zoom with the president and provost, our HR director and representatives, and our faculty senate. We began each meeting telling our stories, insisting on sharing our lived experiences. HR directed us to the provost, and jointly the provost and president directed us to work through the senate, assuring us that this would be the strongest avenue for policy changes. To date, there has been little progress, despite two faculty senate resolutions stemming directly from our recommendations, one of which passed through the senate 27-1 before the provost rejected it.

We open each of the following sections with excerpts from the WFC recommendations, for three reasons: (1) to juxtapose these formal pleas with our embodied stories; (2) to insist, as we did in our initial meetings, on the relationship between memory and embodied action; and (3) to frame each section. Excerpts appear in italics to set it apart from our discussion. Our included images also hold their own narrative weight, breathing life and connectivity into fragmented moments (see Fig. 1).



This picture was taking during the semester while we taking a mandatory department zoom training on Friday at 3:30 while little Martín was sick with stomach bug. Martin had to leave at 3:45 to pick up Aitana from daycare.

1. Veggie straw: only thing he'd eat all day
2. Puke Bucket on the table in case he needed it
3. We ran out of napkins so had to resort to paper towels.
4. Mask on table because we had people doing work out in our yard and they also popped in in the middle of training to ask a question.

Fig. 1 March 2021, Tanya's text message and picture to Diane and Sara. *Used with Permission*

OUR STORIES

Equally valuable is documenting the impact of COVID-19 on women, caregivers, and people of color, so their experiences remain a part of institutional memory.

Tanya's Story: While Having Contractions…

I wrote this email while having contractions, trying to get ready and tell my partner what to put in the hospital bag (see Table 1). I was standing up over the kitchen table and swaying while trying to type: I had contractions at 7:43 am and 7:47 am. Soon they would be two or three minutes apart.

> Email to [my Chair] Monday, March 9, 2020 7:46 am
>
> Subject: May be in labor - need proxy/sub for Univ. Studies Subcommittee Assessment meeting at 1:30 pm today
>
> Hi [Chair],
>
> I may be in labor today. Martin [my spouse and colleague] was officially diagnosed with flu on Friday morning (by the way he was sick before my parents came from Spain- I know a lot of people are on edge about the coronavirus and quarantines and being in contact with people who have been abroad) and was told he needed to be 24 hours fever free in order to

Table 1 An excerpt from Tanya's contraction's app. *Used with permission*

Start time	*Duration (mm:ss)*	*Frequency (mm:ss)*
Mar 09, 2020—7:57 am	00:44	03:34
Mar 09, 2020—7:53 AM	00:33	03:01
Mar 09, 2020—7:50 AM	00:46	03:29
Mar 09, 2020—7:47 AM	00:32	04:04
Mar 09, 2020—7:43 AM	00:49	06:39
Mar 09, 2020—7:36 AM	00:32	03:45
Mar 09, 2020—7:32 AM	00:30	05:57
Mar 09, 2020—7:26 AM	00:36	04:18
Mar 09, 2020—7:22 AM	00:35	06:06
Mar 09, 2020—7:16 AM	00:32	05:02
Mar 09, 2020—7:11 AM	00:31	05:46
Mar 09, 2020—7:05 AM	00:32	03:58
Mar 09, 2020—7:01 AM	00:25	06:57

> be able to be present at labor and delivery…we're approaching that mark. I was planning to talk to you about all this today (…)

My daughter was born three hours after sending that email. A few days before her birth, my parents arrived from Spain, which was experiencing a severe COVID-19 spread. Then, on March 11th, The World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the COVID-19 spread crisis a pandemic. On March 14, Spain declared their *Decreto de alarma,* or State of Emergency. In addition to the worry of COVID, my husband was recovering from the flu. Although he had been cleared to be at the birth and no one mentioned concerns about COVID-19, I remember everyone at Labor and Delivery looking at his masked face wearily as I explained he was recovering from the flu, my doctor had approved his attendance, and we were being extra cautious. And yes, my parents had just arrived from Spain, but my husband got sick before they came. I volunteered this information as I had been anxiously considering all possible scenarios as the updates on COVID-19 grew worrisome.

The fact that the U.S. is one of two countries in the world that has no national paid maternity leave comes with a set of problems such as increased rates of postpartum depression, less satisfactory health outcomes for mothers, impact of breastfeeding duration and increased risk of poverty, that negatively affects parents (Bulanda & Bulanda, 2020). Because our institution did not have at the time a parental leave policy and I was not planning to take any sick leave for the birth, my partner and I worked with our chair and dean to draft a plan that included continuing to teach and do other administrative work after I gave birth. We don't have any local family but my parents and my spouse's parents were willing to travel and visit temporarily to help out. At the time, we felt that with this support in place and our two-year-old attending daycare full-time we could adjust to newborn life while continuing to work. But we did not plan for a pandemic or lockdowns. We did not plan for travel bans that would keep my parents in the United States longer than anticipated or that would mean my sister and her family, who live in Spain, had to cancel plans to meet the new member of our family.

As I write this, my daughter is 19 months and no one from my side of the family, other than my parents, has met her in person. The last time we went to Spain was the summer of 2018 when my son was eight months old. As a multicultural and bilingual family in a rural area of western Kentucky, we were hoping to travel every year in order to expose our children to my home-country's culture and to spend time with family. When travel was no longer an option, I had to resort to an online community to both assuage the feelings of isolation and advocate for change. Nonetheless, persisting questions remained, as travel restrictions and safety concerns were not only imposing inconveniences but also deeply affecting my family's connection with an integral part of our culture and identities. When will we be able to travel internationally again? When will my young children be eligible for a vaccine?

Sara's Story: The Long Momless Stretch

Before the pandemic, friends often asked how I managed as a single parent. My response was always the same—with the help of my community. I relied on friends to take my daughter on an occasional afternoon while I finished prepping courses or to keep her overnight when my babysitter had to cancel during my three-hour evening class. One friend would pick up my recycling; another once picked up meds in the middle of the night when my daughter had a high fever. As Hertz et al. (2021) note, one way single parents in single-adult households manage "the antagonism between production and reproduction" is by "creat[ing] and sustain[ing] supportive networks of resources." I knew I couldn't do the work of single parenting without my "strategic village" (Hertz & Fergeson, 1998, p. 13). And now I was going to.

So began what would become an almost dreamlike state of existing. I would work long before my daughter was awake. When she woke up, we would eat breakfast, read stories, and wait until it was late enough to Facetime with "Grammy and Papa" in Arizona. They became her remote babysitters. She would bring them from room to room, narrating her play. Together they would tell stories, play games, make faces. On the one hand, I was grateful for what this digital workaround afforded: Ayla remained connected to our family at a time when long-distance connections were tenuous and I gained a little time to work (in my bedroom with the door shut); what it did not allow me, however, was focused time, which is what I most needed. My daughter came in continually to ask for things, share her thoughts, just generally be a four-year-old in my presence. One morning I tracked these interruptions:

> 4/23/20
>
> [Papa and my daughter are reenacting the entire *Frozen* movie through all of this. I am within earshot]
>
> 8:47 hands me a tray of plastic birthday party food and asks me to try it
>
> 9:00 "Can you turn over all the match game pieces in this box lid and then find a match?"
>
> 9:07 "I can't find my Elsa costume with the cape. Can you help me find it?"
>
> 9:09 "I'm just telling you I'm going potty, but I'm not going poop."
>
> 9:10 "I'm not going poop, but I'm finished going pee."
>
> 9:21 "Where's my other Elsa glove?"
>
> 9:22 "I got a different glove." [shows me]
>
> 9:44 [Loud singing and rubbing sparkly shoes together to make a grinding noise]
>
> 9:50 "Mommy, I need a snack. Can I have a popsicle?"
>
> 9:58 "Will you read me the back of this squeezie?"
>
> 9:59 "Mama, you're the best! Will you read me this story? … I'll just look at the pictures." [sits beside me narrating story aloud]
>
> 10:01 "Mama, is there anything I can do around here? I'm bored."
>
> 10:23 "I'm going to wait for my princess [made from paper and glue] to dry."
>
> [Singing at top of her lungs for I don't know how long a song she is making up as she goes along]

In the evenings, when I taught class, I gave her dinner on the couch with a tablet and headphones. She watched shows until I finished at 9 p.m. I didn't mind so much that she would regularly interrupt class, hollering from the other room for a snack. Rather, I was always partially (or fully) attending to her needs. Right up to the start of class I was setting her up for the long momless stretch (see Fig. 2). I then kept her occupied during class, putting her to bed immediately after. In their study on single mothers' experiences during the pandemic, Hertz et al. found that women who lived in single-parent households (as opposed to single parents in multiple-adult households) "were more likely to cite 'trying to work while caring for children at the same time' as a major impediment to productivity" (2021, p. 2029). Further, without personal time, "their identities as workers and mothers were no longer 'mutually supportive'" (Garey, 1999, p. 79). I felt this conflict. There was never a moment when I was doing a single thing at once. This split mind, as many parents know, is not conducive to much, and certainly not to research, so research was put on hold.

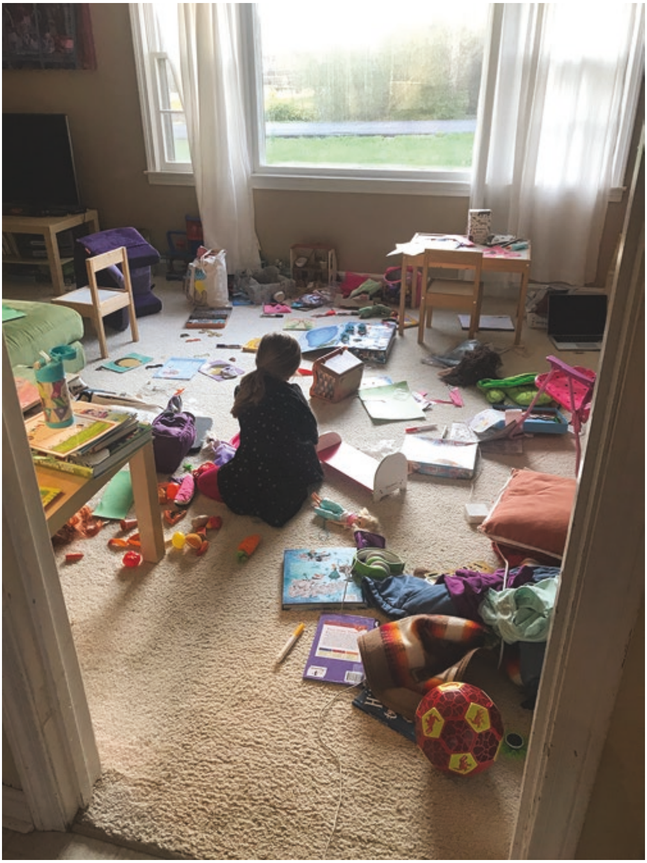


Fig. 2 A picture of Sara's daughter playing in the living room while Sara worked in the kitchen. *Used with Permission*

Diane's Story: I Keep Walking

Right before our university went on spring break in mid-March, 2020, I told my students I did not think we were coming back after the two-week "flatten the curve" trial. I asked them to prepare to go asynchronously if my toddler's daycare closed. It did. And our university went remote. A few weeks later, to take a break from our new work-from-home schedule, I took my son and dog for a walk in our neighborhood. Below is my Facebook post hours after we returned home (see Fig. 3).

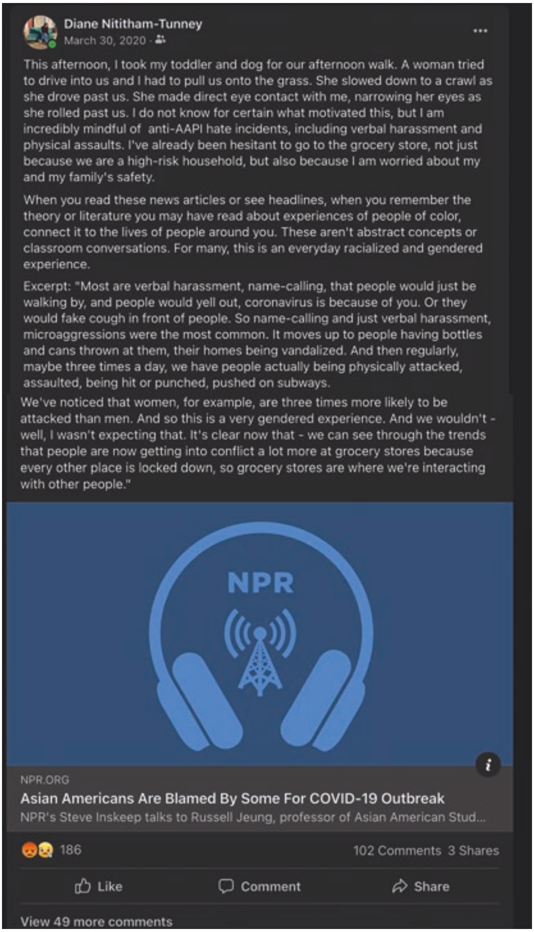


Fig. 3 A screenshot of Diane's social media post. *Used with Permission*

Diane Nititham-Tunney
March 30, 2020 ·

This afternoon, I took my toddler and dog for our afternoon walk. A woman tried to drive into us and I had to pull us onto the grass. She slowed down to a crawl as she drove past us. She made direct eye contact with me, narrowing her eyes as she rolled past us. I do not know for certain what motivated this, but I am incredibly mindful of anti-AAPI hate incidents, including verbal harassment and physical assaults. I've already been hesitant to go to the grocery store, not just because we are a high-risk household, but also because I am worried about my and my family's safety.

When you read these news articles or see headlines, when you remember the theory or literature you may have read about experiences of people of color, connect it to the lives of people around you. These aren't abstract concepts or classroom conversations. For many, this is an everyday racialized and gendered experience.

Excerpt: "Most are verbal harassment, name-calling, that people would just be walking by, and people would yell out, coronavirus is because of you. Or they would fake cough in front of people. So name-calling and just verbal harassment, microaggressions were the most common. It moves up to people having bottles and cans thrown at them, their homes being vandalized. And then regularly, maybe three times a day, we have people actually being physically attacked, assaulted, being hit or punched, pushed on subways.
We've noticed that women, for example, are three times more likely to be attacked than men. And so this is a very gendered experience. And we wouldn't - well, I wasn't expecting that. It's clear now that - we can see through the trends that people are now getting into conflict a lot more at grocery stores because every other place is locked down, so grocery stores are where we're interacting with other people."

NPR.ORG
Asian Americans Are Blamed By Some For COVID-19 Outbreak
NPR's Steve Inskeep talks to Russell Jeung, professor of Asian American Stud...

186 102 Comments 3 Shares

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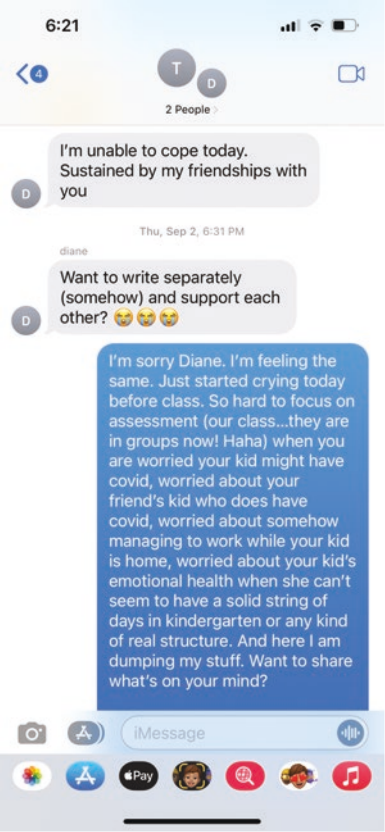
Like the ebbs and flows of the sea, life in our small town fluctuates. On some days, everything feels fine. We have close friends and our neighborhood feels friendly. Yet on other days, I am reminded that we are outsiders. This town has 2.15% people of Asian descent. My spouse, an Irish immigrant, can blend in with the over 87% that identify as White. We wonder what experiences our child will have, far away from our multi-sited transnational family, growing up with few folks with similar stories. As one of a few Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) and second-generation Americans, many of my cumulative experiences of microaggressions and systemic barriers are only relatable to my friends and colleagues via research. If even. In order for this incident to not fade away, I posted it to social media, connecting local moments to my global community. Beyond the challenges, the joys I experience through connecting digitally to our families, throughout the US, Ireland, the Philippines, and Thailand—feel fleeting. When the calls end, we remain here. I am thankful that digital communication has strengthened tethers to my local and transnational family. But I worry each time we step outside. While unlikely that we are in constant danger, I carry this dread (see Fig. 4). I keep walking, though. I make efforts to introduce myself to my neighbors. I smile, wave, and mention our names in conversation. I overshare. My goal is to build



I'm unable to cope today. Sustained by my friendships with you

Thu, Sep 2, 6:31 PM

diane

Want to write separately (somehow) and support each other? 😭😭😭

I'm sorry Diane. I'm feeling the same. Just started crying today before class. So hard to focus on assessment (our class...they are in groups now! Haha) when you are worried your kid might have covid, worried about your friend's kid who does have covid, worried about somehow managing to work while your kid is home, worried about your kid's emotional health when she can't seem to have a solid string of days in kindergarten or any kind of real structure. And here I am dumping my stuff. Want to share what's on your mind?

Fig. 4 A screenshot of Diane's text to Sara and Tanya. *Used with Permission*

relationships in our neighborhood. If we are hurt while out on a walk, could I knock on their doors to ask for their help? Would they be more likely to aid us if they knew our names? That we are not nameless faceless outsiders? I keep walking. I have to.

Untenable and Unbearable

Faculty need flexibility in how they teach their courses and conduct office hours. It is especially important that this flexibility be consistent and well-communicated across departments and colleges.

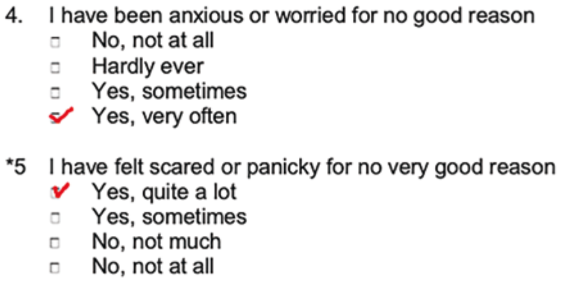
Tanya's Story Continued: *Postpartum Haze*

My husband has chronic health issues that have been exacerbated by the stressors of the pandemic. In their multinational project, The Unequal Pandemic: COVID-19 and Health inequalities, the authors outline the major effects and collateral damage that the pandemic has caused, which include not only a crisis in the treatment of chronic health conditions exacerbated by an overwhelmed healthcare system but also other socio-economic factors that have been more clearly revealed across nations (Bambra et al., 2021). With my spouse's chronic health issues fluctuating throughout this pandemic, I have found myself at times having to be a full-time caregiver for all members of my immediate family. In turn, my own health has suffered and back-to-normal seems further away than ever. Additionally, the postpartum haze after the birth of my second child was particularly dense.

At my daughter's pediatrician appointments after her birth, I filled out the standard postpartum depression screenings (Fig. 5).

I remember not knowing how to qualify some of my answers. I have felt anxious, worried, panicked, or scared *for a very good reason*—we are in the middle of a pandemic. Doesn't this form need to be updated and adapted? As I was reflecting on this period and writing about my experience, I inquired about the results for these screenings. While my pediatrician's office no longer had the answers for each time I filled out the form, a nurse gave me a post-it note with the overall scores (Fig. 6):

Cox, Holden, and Sagovsky write, "[o]ur data suggested that women who scored above a threshold of 12/13 were most likely to be suffering from a depressive illness of varying severity, and should therefore be further assessed by the primary care worker to confirm whether or not clinical

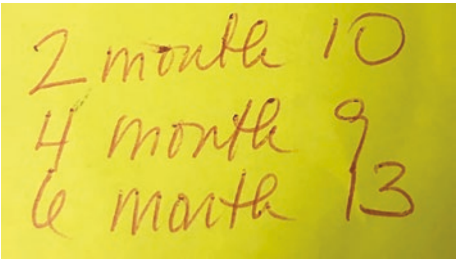


4. I have been anxious or worried for no good reason
   - ☐ No, not at all
   - ☐ Hardly ever
   - ☐ Yes, sometimes
   - ☑ Yes, very often

*5 I have felt scared or panicky for no very good reason
   - ☑ Yes, quite a lot
   - ☐ Yes, sometimes
   - ☐ No, not much
   - ☐ No, not at all

Fig. 5 A section of The Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale form. *Used with Permission*

Fig. 6 A picture of the post-it note. *Used with Permission*



2 month 10
4 month 9
6 month 13

depression is present." (1987, p. 785). At the time, no one told me my scores or said that I was at risk for postnatal depression.

My anxiety grew exponentially when my daughter, at four months old, got sick for the first time in her life (see Fig. 7). The pediatrician was concerned and sent us to get X-rays and a COVID-19 test—the first of many that would follow. I recall the anxiety from when my son got sick as a baby, but postpartum haze plus COVID-19 heightened my sense of worry to levels that I had never felt before. I mentally buckled myself while holding my sick baby tighter. This is just the beginning.

This postpartum haze and sense of isolation have been heightened by the additional medical treatments we have had to pursue. Since we live in a rural area, we have to travel out of town or out of state to access specialists and larger hospitals that offer services not available locally. When I gave birth to my son in 2017, I had issues breastfeeding; after months of pursuing the issue with medical professionals, we found the underlying issues that were affecting our nursing relationship. We went on to continue to breastfeed, with formula supplementation, until he was three

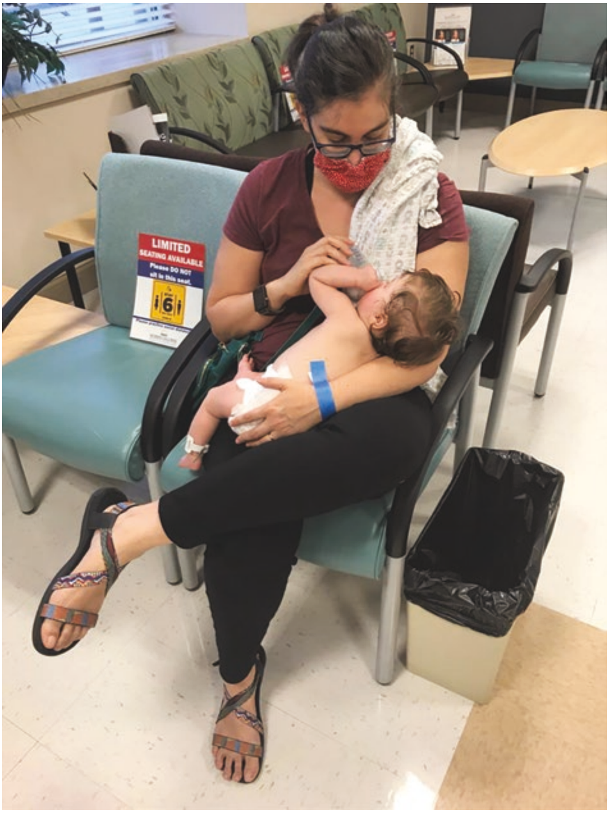


Fig. 7 Tanya and her four-month-old daughter next to a social distance sign, waiting to get X-rays at the hospital. *Used with Permission*

years old. But I vowed that I would do things differently if we were to have another baby: I would not put my physical and mental health on the back burner or spend endless hours attached to a pump. I would have my baby evaluated for ties as soon as possible; I would not second-guess the use of formula. Fast forward to March 2020 and my daughter was having trouble latching. I had been down this road. I knew I needed to make different decisions. But things were different now: maybe breast milk would offer my baby some protection against COVID-19? There was so much that was unknown—and still is. I immediately sought out a referral for a pediatric dentist. As states started discussing postponing elective medical procedures, our sense of urgency increased as we tried to get my daughter seen before the world shut down.

My daughter had the procedure but we still struggled to breastfeed. After a few months of exclusively pumping to produce a few ounces, waking up at night while my baby slept so I could pump, pumping during the day while someone else fed my baby, triple feeding, power pumping, using an SNS (Supplemental Nursing System) I decided to give my body and mind a break: I stopped pumping and we fully switched to formula. Everyone was happier and more well-rested. My children didn't have to compete with the pump for my attention. But as I see new studies coming out recruiting lactating parents who are vaccinated to research the impact of vaccines and protection against COVID-19, I second guess my decision as I try not to spiral into the shame culture that parents, especially mothers, are bombarded with (see Liss et al., 2013).

My son had surgery in December 2020 (see Fig. 8). We were extremely lucky that Diane and her family, with whom we had bubbled, were willing

Fig. 8 Tanya's then 3-year old son waiting for his surgery. *Used with Permission*

to take care of our daughter so we could travel out of state for the procedure. As only one caregiver was allowed to accompany a minor, my husband and I decided that he would wait outside while I went with my son for his pre-op, surgery, and recovery. A negative COVID-19 test no more than 48 hours before surgery was required. Limited PCR test availability required that we drive to a nearby town to obtain one. I knew these precautions were necessary. However, as I saw people travel, refuse to wear masks, and go on about their lives as if nothing was happening, while we continued to isolate and make sacrifices, I couldn't help but be resentful. I still am.

Not Going to Make It

The university must support faculty in caregiving roles. Support could include […] offering subsidies for childcare and/or adult care; creating an on-campus childcare facility; creating a fund to supplement the cost of care when schools are closed …

Much of our digital exchanges highlight invisible work (see Figs. 9 and 10). The following excerpts from Sara's emails, while appearing as one

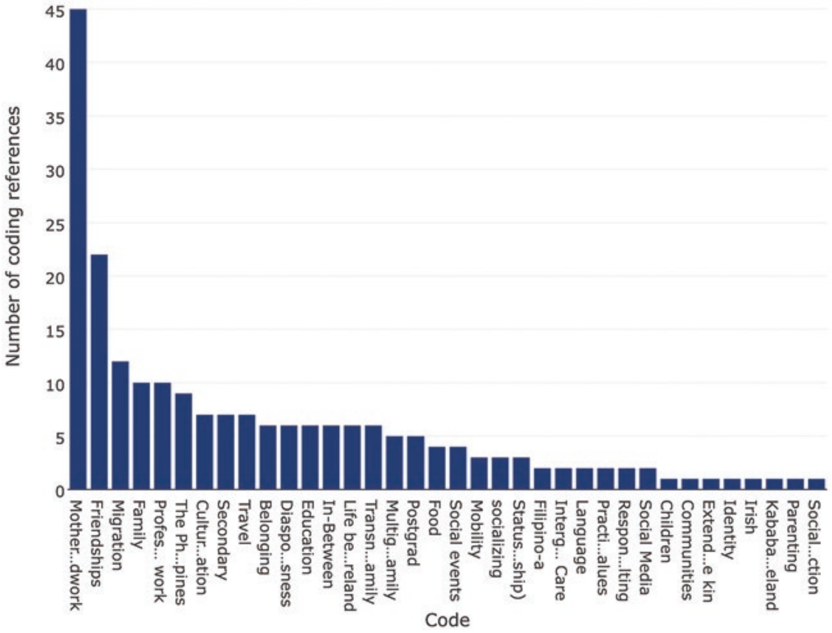
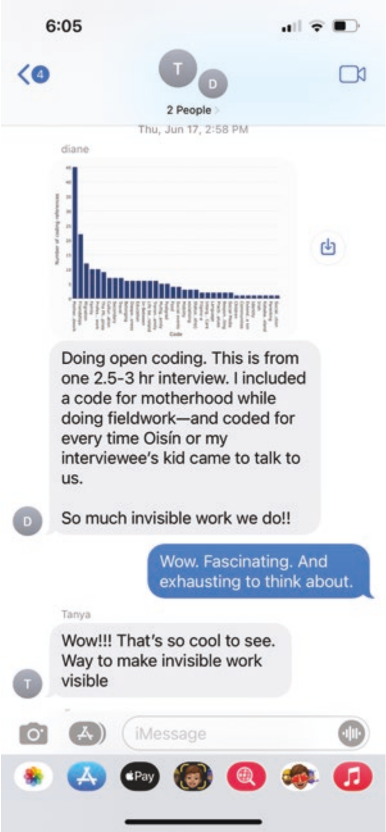


Fig. 9 An image of Diane's open coding chart. *Used with Permission*



Thu, Jun 17, 2:58 PM

diane

Doing open coding. This is from one 2.5-3 hr interview. I included a code for motherhood while doing fieldwork—and coded for every time Oisín or my interviewee's kid came to talk to us.

So much invisible work we do!!

Wow. Fascinating. And exhausting to think about.

Tanya

Wow!!! That's so cool to see. Way to make invisible work visible

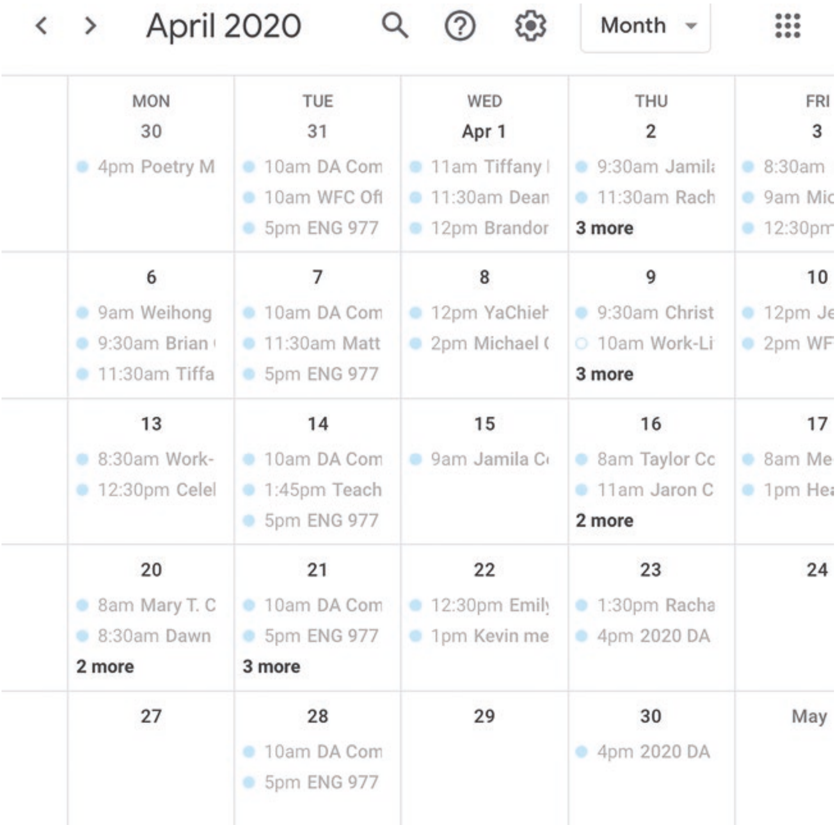
Fig. 10 A screenshot of Diane's text to Sara and Tanya. *Used with Permission*

way communication, are interactive and produced within a system of exchange. In sharing these emails with each other and with readers, we bridge a gap between our individual experiences and that of others. For Hernández, Sancho, Creus, and Montané (2010), collaborative readings of autoethnographies provided space to reveal shared experiences of the autoethnographers and researchers:

> Identifying the issues emerging from a set of autobiographies is a practice that enables the individual experience to become something shared and

> social. This practice allowed us to establish bridges, nexuses, and differences, making the individual autoethnographies transform into a convergence of narratives related to the social and cultural forces having an effect on our ways of becoming university teachers and researchers. (p. 7)

The section begins with Sara's calendar the first full month of the pandemic followed by images of Diane working from home and then Sara's emails, listed chronologically (see Figs. 11, 12, 13, and 14).



MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI
30 4pm Poetry M	31 10am DA Com 10am WFC Ofi 5pm ENG 977	Apr 1 11am Tiffany 11:30am Dean 12pm Brandor	2 9:30am Jamil 11:30am Rach 3 more	3 8:30am 9am Mic 12:30pr
6 9am Weihong 9:30am Brian 11:30am Tiffa	7 10am DA Com 11:30am Matt 5pm ENG 977	8 12pm YaChieh 2pm Michael	9 9:30am Christ ○ 10am Work-Li 3 more	10 12pm Je 2pm WF
13 8:30am Work- 12:30pm Celel	14 10am DA Com 1:45pm Teach 5pm ENG 977	15 9am Jamila C	16 8am Taylor Co 11am Jaron C 2 more	17 8am Me 1pm He
20 8am Mary T. C 8:30am Dawn 2 more	21 10am DA Com 5pm ENG 977 3 more	22 12:30pm Emily 1pm Kevin me	23 1:30pm Racha 4pm 2020 DA	24
27	28 10am DA Com 5pm ENG 977	29	30 4pm 2020 DA	May

Fig. 11 Screenshot of Sara's calendar. *Used with Permission*

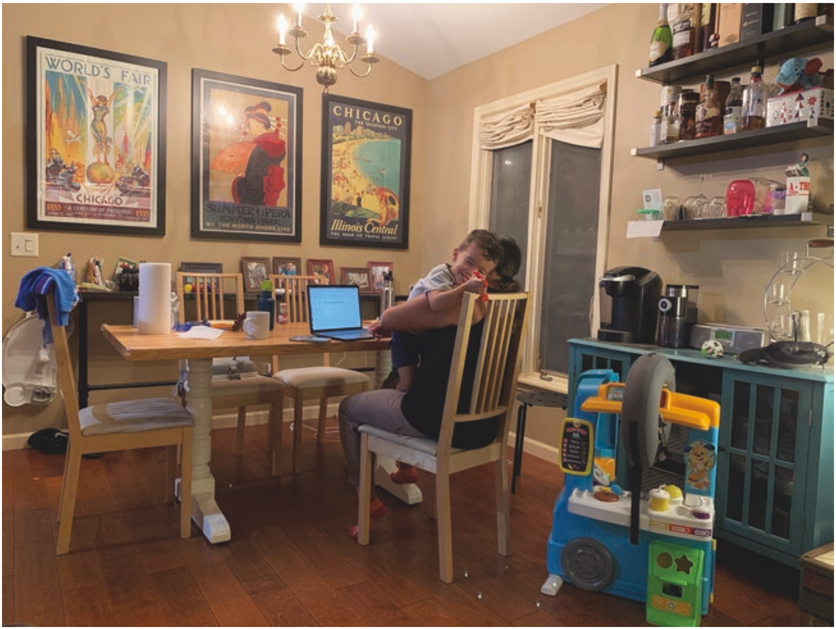

WORLD'S FAIR
CHICAGO
SUMMER OPERA
CHICAGO
Illinois Central

Fig. 12 Diane is writing lectures with a 3 year old on top of her. September 2020. *Used with Permission*

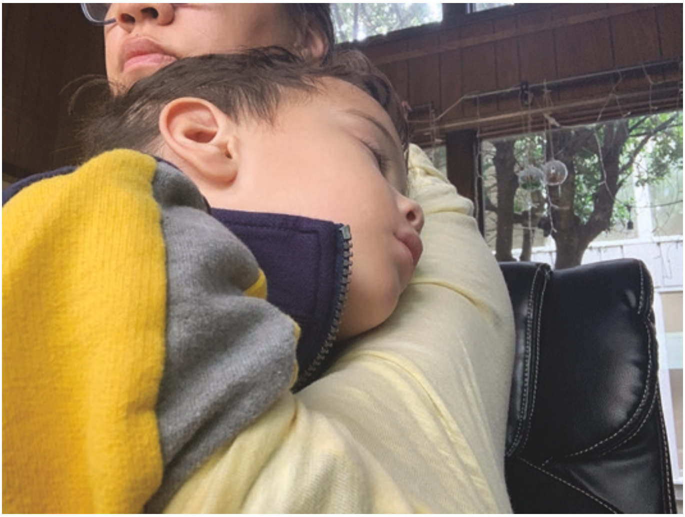
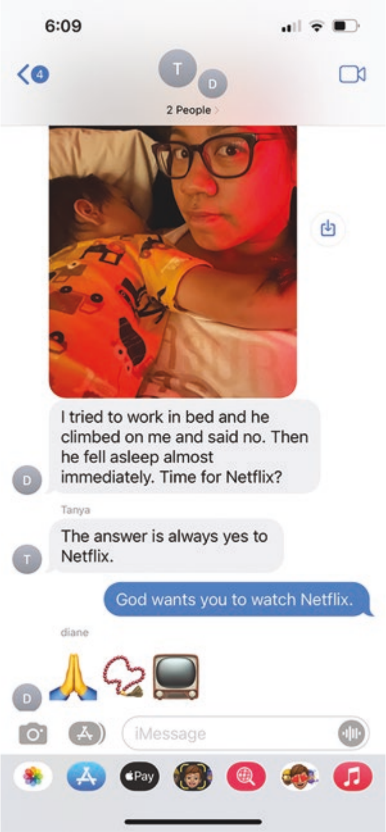


Fig. 13 Diane teaches while she holds her son: "He climbed on me, put his arm up my sleeve, and fell asleep while I taught via Zoom." November 2020. *Used with Permission*



I tried to work in bed and he climbed on me and said no. Then he fell asleep almost immediately. Time for Netflix?

Tanya

The answer is always yes to Netflix.

God wants you to watch Netflix.

diane

🙏📿📺

Fig. 14 A screenshot of Diane's picture and text sent to Tanya and Sara. July 2021. *Used with Permission*

March 16, 2020

Hi [Chair],

I plan to work remotely.

Thanks,

Sara

March 21, 2020

Hi [Chair],

I wanted to reach out so you would know my situation. I'm now looking at completing the semester with no childcare. Daycares are closed, as I'm sure you know. And I'm not sure whether my babysitter will be able to watch [my daughter] in the evenings (or whether I'm comfortable having her here given current risks of infection). As a single parent, I also don't have a partner with whom I can share childcare responsibilities.

I know everyone in the department is challenged by our current situation. I think parents of young kids are especially challenged with schools and daycares closed. I'm wondering if you would be willing to release faculty from non-essential duties (beyond teaching), at least for the duration of the semester. […]

I fully intend to keep up with teaching responsibilities […]. I will be doing most of this work, however, in the evenings and early mornings, or while also parenting a four-year-old.

Thanks for considering.

Sara

March 23, 2020

Hi [Peer Teaching Reviewers],

Do either of you know whether we are still required to do teaching observations this semester? I'm now doing my job with a four-year-old at home, and no babysitter or childcare. [….]

Whether we do the observations or not, I probably need to postpone our meeting […]

Sara

March 26, 2020

Hi [student],

I need to cancel our meeting today […] My apologies. Now that I have [my daughter] home full time, I have to schedule a little differently.

[…]

Sara

March 31, 2020

Hi [Committee],

I'm so sorry everyone, but I'm not going to be able to make our meeting today.

Sara

Stuck in a Loop

Sick leave policies should be reevaluated to ensure faculty adversely impacted by COVID-19 have access to adequate paid sick leave. This may mean revisiting sick leave policies to guarantee faculty have access to emergency time off as required. Additionally, the university should create a clear procedure with Human Resources to uphold the CARES act.

Diane's Story Continued: *The Run-Around*

12/2020
When members of the WFC executive team asked representatives from HR for support during the pandemic, we each shared our stories. I began with a series of questions, describing my anxiety over being high-risk and concerns about what the semester would actually look like if our daycare closed. Below is an excerpt of what I shared:

1. I read and reread the university reopening plan.
2. I call HR about my concerns.
3. I am told "the situation is fluid. Work with your chair."
4. I call my chair and he says, "the situation is fluid. Work with HR. Contact IDEA."
5. I contact IDEA—"Work with your chair and HR. We have no legal capacity to help you unless you have an ADA issue."

I feel stuck in a loop. These questions remain unanswered. More conversation and more questions, including: When I take sick leave, whether to care for myself or my child, who picks up my classes? My lessons? Who takes up grading? What if his daycare closes his room? My chair assures me, "Diane, this is a chair and HR problem. Not a Diane problem."

But it *is* a Diane problem, because if work gets shared with my colleagues, who are already also overworked, this impacts our morale and workloads. Even if my child is not sick, working from home still makes it challenging to complete work effectively. During the first full semester of the pandemic, I lost nearly 15–18 hours of work a week because of early daycare closing (4 pm) and his needs as a young child. Then, with temporary COVID closures close to the end of fall semester, I felt that I could not take leave due to my students' needs. Every single decision made me realize that all available options were crappy, and no matter what choice I made, all of them were wrong. Taking leave feels like I would fail my colleagues. I am the sole income earner for my family, so additional leave time, paid or unpaid, means I am just passing the pressure onto other families. So many articles and studies point to how women, particularly women of color, are disproportionately impacted by this global pandemic. I am worried for all of us. What systems of support is the university offering besides the CARES Act? Are there other sources of support? Why is our rallying cry “Just do your best.” “We’re in this together.”? Migraines, nausea, fatigue from stress are sadly my familiar friends.

Nearly a year after our HR meeting and countless conversations with my chair, I still have no clear answers. We are back teaching face-to-face with no vaccine mandate. Our county has high COVID cases and low vaccination rates. Students are mostly compliant with masking, but enforcement is left to faculty. At the time of writing, the FDA has just approved emergency use of the Pfizer vaccine for 5–11 year olds. My son is one month away from turning 5. I am tired from holding my breath.

Tanya’s Story Continued: *Constant Closures: Fall 2021*

I get ready for another semester in a pandemic without much choice but to put both kids in daycare. We have been doing this for a while now. We have done it all: kept kids at home while working, nanny shared with another family. My only consolation is that we have avoided COVID so far and that my son now rarely gets sick. But I look at my daughter and know that she will get sick often as is common during the first two years of daycare.

A Week before Classes Start

The Tuesday before classes begin, Diane and I get a message from a mutual friend that there’s some news awaiting us at our daycare. I ask, “Bad news?” “Yes,” she says. I text Diane anxiously. It was 45 minutes before our usual pick-up time but I started gathering stuff to pick up the kids. I tell my husband that we need to go ASAP. Is this about a COVID exposure? Wouldn’t daycare have called us? Maybe they did not have time to call everyone yet. Diane and I talk about carpooling and picking up the kids together. But then I start thinking that if it’s one of my kids that has been exposed to COVID we don’t want to share a car and risk more exposure. I called her, “Let’s drive separate cars.” My husband and I arrive; I can see Diane standing outside waiting. We are on the verge of tears. She says, “I didn’t want to read the sign but I saw it and couldn’t help it. They’re closing permanently. Friday.” Panic and chaos ensues: the two families gather together. The four adults make numerous calls before other daycares close for the day. We spend the next few days looking for a place that will take our children, an impossible task as waitlists are long and finding childcare was challenging even before the pandemic. I worry in particular for my daughter, knowing how much harder it is to get a spot for a kid under two. We worry about my son and his best friend, Diane’s son, and whether they will be able to attend the same daycare. On Friday at 5 pm, we toured a daycare that had opened just before the pandemic and had gone unnoticed by most people, including us, until then.

Week 3

August 30. COVID tests for Aitana and I. My children and I quarantine as we wait for results. Following our institution's protocol, my husband can teach in person since he is asymptomatic, vaccinated, and masked. While he is gone, I have to care for my sick children, while being sick and trying to keep up with my workload (see Fig. 15).

Weeks 4 and 5

My daughter gets diagnosed with RSV and she is out of daycare for ten days. My husband also gets sick. My son has two assessments scheduled. After being cleared, we are able to take him to his appointments, which had been scheduled for months.

Week 8

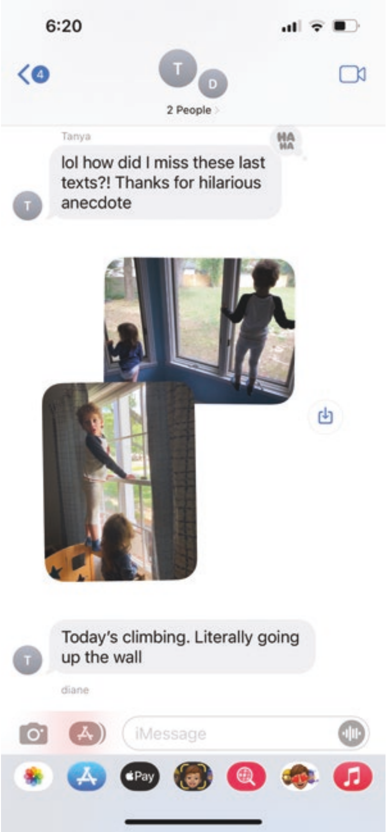
Another COVID test for Aitana. Thankfully it's negative again. I sigh with relief when I hear the results and I am also excited that she can go back to daycare for our two-day fall break: I am planning on catching up with all the missed work.

Week 9

Aitana is sick. She does not have a fever so the pediatrician doesn't think a COVID test is necessary. I emailed my chair to let them know that I can be at all my Zoom meetings.

Week 10

Aitana got sick last night. She is staying home with her grandparents. I am writing this and I look at the next six weeks and wonder how many more times someone will get sick, how many more COVID tests and quarantines can we handle. Most of all, I wonder whether we will be able to avoid getting infected with COVID-19 before my children are eligible to get a vaccine.



lol how did I miss these last texts?! Thanks for hilarious anecdote

Today's climbing. Literally going up the wall

Fig. 15 A screenshot of Tanya's text and pictures of her kids sent to Diane and Sara. Sept. 2021. *Used with Permission*

Sara's Story Continued: *Danger Room*

4/2/20
Haven't wanted to write anything. Maybe because I haven't wanted to feel. Though I have felt. Big feelings Friday night. Tomorrow is Friday again. How could that be? Time is slippery right now. Almost three weeks since the university went online, since daycares shut their doors, since I've become a full-time stay-at-home mom (SAHM) with a full-time job, since I've been allowed to see friends, colleagues, or anyone. I am closest (physically) to the cashier at the grocery store each week. And we both seem uncomfortable with that.

4/6/20
Every afternoon we bike to campus. My daughter rides the bike I bought her for way too much because the world fell apart and we needed a boost. She gets a little better each day. She's climbing hills on her own, learning to brake. The thing I have to tell her most is, "look forward" (she gets distracted by people, trees, dogs, bugs, flowers) and "get out of the middle of the road." When we get to campus, we usually go to her "palace"—the old library with the grand steps and ornate light fixtures (see Fig. 16). She tells me she is Princess Flower Ginger. (I am Queen La-Di-Da). The palace has a bedroom and a danger room (where we go if there is danger, she says). And there is danger. An entire level turns to hot lava at night. A less than ideal situation. Otherwise, things are normal. We brush our teeth with rocks, sleep on the nearby benches. When we wake up, we discuss the day. Today the plan was to stay in until after lunch when we would go to the park. We ended up sitting on a high ledge and eating oranges.

9/3/21
Yesterday the nurse from my daughter's school called to tell me she had been exposed to COVID and would need to be quarantined. I missed the call because I was in a meeting with a group of women/academics about mothering during COVID. My daughter was exposed by her best friend who sits beside her at school and with whom she had spent the entirety of the previous year.

The two girls are like sisters, but sisters who were, for some time, allowed to see no other children but each other. I still remember when they were first allowed to be near each other after months of separation. I have a picture on my phone. They are clutching each other in an overstuffed armchair, watching a show.

When I picked my daughter up from school, she said, "Mama, why did this happen?" I didn't know what to tell her. She said she liked kindergarten and didn't want to miss it. She also said that after being home she wouldn't want to go back. I understood what she was telling me. How do we function when our lives are a series of disruptions? Disruptions we expect in some way but yet have no recourse for response?

My daughter has to be home for between 7 and 10 days from the time of exposure. Somehow, I am supposed to make this work. I am having flashbacks to when I was asked to do this before. It didn't work. It hasn't worked. My body suffered. My mind did. I am somehow buoyed by my friends who are mothers who are also drowning.

Fig. 16 A picture of Sara's daughter during their daily campus bike ride. Spring 2020. *Used with Permission*

Limited Pathways

While it is significant to offer tenure-track faculty whose research and professionalization is impacted by the pandemic an additional year to complete tenure, this action does not go far enough to address inequity since those choosing this option are also choosing to postpone salary increases and other benefits associated with promotion.

Sara's Story Continued: *Journal Entry* 10/6/21

I have volunteered to chair a new committee focused on supporting caregivers during COVID. I am having trouble rallying after more than a year doing this work with little to no results. At a recent meeting with a faculty senator, we discussed the possibility of revisiting the faculty senate resolution that would grant retroactive raises to those who postpone tenure or promotion due to the pandemic. What I don't share in this meeting is that this issue is personal. I will likely be delaying tenure. I am realizing this is only due in part to the pandemic. When I started at my institution, I couldn't find a daycare spot. I started calling around the week I accepted the position, six months prior to the semester's start. Most places told me they had a waiting list of at least a year, sometimes two. When I arrived in town, I had no choice but to hire a babysitter to watch my daughter while I was at work. Having spent the last five years in grad school, I couldn't afford more than a few days a week of care and for limited hours. I thus spent the first several months of my tenure-track position working full-time with only part-time childcare. I was also actively hustling for a daycare spot. It hadn't occurred to me that my employer could or should have a hand in ensuring I had childcare, a service which was required for me to do my job. I was too busy trying to survive.

My students and I frequently discuss how the pandemic exacerbates existing inequities. Given I've spent more than a year advocating for caregivers, I am surprised how long it took me to realize this applies, too, to mothers in academia. The connection between that first year without childcare and our recommendations didn't occur to me until I started listening to other mother's stories.

Diane's Story Continued: *A Rambling* 10/1/2020

One morning this October, I woke to a group text exchange from my friends in Ireland, Magdalena and Layla. Magdalena texted that she was not short-listed for an academic position. All three of us are mothers. We finished our PhDs around the same time, more than 10 years ago. While we've all been active in contributing to conferences; writing chapters, peer-reviewed articles, and books; and curating projects, we remain limited by our position as mothers in academia, making do within a larger unequal system.

Sadness is now resentment. I resent that Magdalena, Layla, and I share complicated spaces of success yet continue to feel like failures. Both Magdalena and Layla have children, and with multiple births, maternity leaves, and household responsibilities, alongside a grossly competitive job market, they have worked multiple short-term teaching and research contracts, post-docs, and projects. They've remained active in their scholarship and have continued to seek a more stable position. My spouse and I, years before I finished the PhD, talked about having multiple children. We were in our 20s. After moving to the US in our early 30s, we never felt secure enough to realize this plan. With short-term contracts and precarious positions, we worried about healthcare, continued employment, housing, and my student loans. While I am tenured now and we have one child, we are both over 40 and ask that proverbial question—*where have the years gone*? Through the lens of academic success, Magdalena, Layla, and I remain tied to an either/or dichotomy. The choices of having a larger family or career are often framed as personal choices, rather than as choices made within narrow pathways that limit our full agency.

Scholarship on academic motherhood recognizes that women's choices are constrained by the intersecting dynamics of patriarchy, capitalism, and misogyny (Gilbert, 2008; Low & Damian Martin, 2019; Maxwell et al., 2018; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004, 2016). Academic mothers' experiences are further exacerbated by guilt and societal expectations (Gilbert, 2008; Jenkins, 2020). Baker writes:

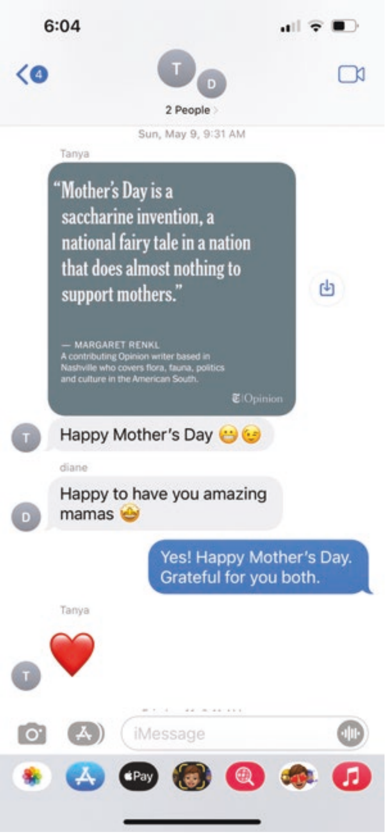
> [a] disproportionate number of academic women continue to remain child-free, partly because the timing of reproduction conflicts with gaining a doctorate or job security. Many mothers complete doctorates after their children are in school but this pattern usually means that they cannot reach the professoriate by retirement age. (2012, p. 22).

Academic women with a salaried position, particularly in the United States, are further limited by lack of suitable parental leave and childcare. With contingent faculty, the situation becomes more precarious, as insurance is tied to full-time employment, and other benefits associated with a salaried position (Bertram Gallant, 2018; McNaughtan et al., 2017; Tirelli, 2014).

It is no surprise that when I came to my current university, I could not find academic mothers who gave birth during their probationary years. I asked my dean for advice. She told me that women with children that are employed here either came in with children or waited until they received tenure. I decided, well. We'll have a baby anyway. Now, after having given birth while on the tenure-track, and with a supportive department chair and dean, I was able to have a flexible schedule the semester I gave birth. But what about those with unsupportive chairs or deans? What if their colleagues were not helpful? It also took me years to get back on track with reading, writing, and publishing after giving birth. If I had not had enough materials before birth, would I have had enough for tenure? I have more financial security and insurance than before, but have concerns about my reproductive health and wellbeing. I worry about my aging parents and impending caregiver role with them, and having to commute to another state. I feel the brunt of *either* being a caregiver *or* an academic. I don't know how much more I can give, especially as we are yet to come out of this pandemic.

When we eat dinner, I focus my energy on the chairs that are full, not empty. But I grieve about gendered academic parenthood, mourning for a larger family while seeing the pain of constant liminality for Magdalena and Layla and the elusiveness of the academic opportunities they continue to seek. We are stuck, unable to be *both* fully employed academics *and* mothers. I try hard not to resent my academic father colleagues. But, I do. It is tightly woven through me, because even among the most empathetic of my academic father colleagues, they easily occupy a space of being *both/and*, even if they don't see it. Despite the many challenges of pandemic living and working from home, they can and do *embrace* the pathways to both/and. *Why don't you just shut the door for a few hours and write? Put on some headphones! Block out the kids!* Hearing multiple variations like these, it solidifies two things for me: (1) My academic father colleagues see academic mothers' career and caregiving challenges as personal choices, (2) I now know how much reproductive labor and caregiving their partners (mostly women) are doing to sustain the household, their families, and thus, their careers. Many of my academic father friends continue their work amidst this global emergency, while my academic mother friends are exponentially burdened. Like many other academic mothers, they are struggling to uphold ongoing reproductive labor while patching together what they can of their research, teaching, and service (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2018; Miller, 2020; Minello et al., 2021; Pruulmann-Cenverfeldt, 2021).

I feel for Magdalena and Layla. They know I feel guilty about tenure and they are not on the ladder-rank. They tell me not to. They tell me I made it. But this is not all about me. The three of us recognize that our either/or positions are a result of the limited options available to us. These limitations came before our existence and I doubt very much will change soon (see Fig. 17). Women remain constrained. Academic mothers are further limited by the ‘motherhood penalty’, where their careers lag behind child-free colleagues (Baker, 2012). I try to manifest my guilt into organizing collective action, yet the acamamas I know are more than overstretched, our work barely visible, our energy…gone. Our men colleagues say, “I feel you.” They don’t. Chairs and deans say, “You’re doing great.” We aren’t. Their dismissive responses make the weight of unchecked patriarchal capitalism within the university even heavier. This is unsustainable. Unattainable.



Sun, May 9, 9:31 AM

Tanya

“Mother’s Day is a saccharine invention, a national fairy tale in a nation that does almost nothing to support mothers.”

— MARGARET RENKL
A contributing Opinion writer based in Nashville who covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South.

Happy Mother’s Day 😬😉

diane

Happy to have you amazing mamas 🤩

Yes! Happy Mother’s Day. Grateful for you both.

Tanya

❤️

Fig. 17 A screenshot of the authors’ text exchange on Mother’s Day 2020. *Used with Permission*

Picking Up Pieces

It is important that university administration, including the provost, publicly and explicitly acknowledge the pandemic's impact on faculty research and productivity, especially for women, people of color, and those in caregiving roles.

In "Prioritize Care for a More Resilient Future," Nelson shows how pandemic-imposed restrictions and constraints have "reveal[ed] societal fractures that were mostly ignored by those with the structural and institutional power to create better lives for everyday people" (2021, p. 295). In this untenable system, we continue to gasp for air under the pressure of a seemingly endless pandemic. Additionally, as Ocloo suggests, we need to "[r]eview who is involved in key strategic decision-making (…), and how this reflects local diverse communities, particularly those who are often excluded such as people from Black African, Asian, Caribbean, and other minority ethnic backgrounds, and disabled people, who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic" (2021, p. 33). It is our responsibility to advocate for these changes. We began this chapter with WFC's recommendations for supporting caregivers followed by intimate moments of our day-to-day lives. These moments, intertwined with our official organizational work, fueled, mirrored, and made more impactful our commitments to institutional action. We recognize that our gendered and classed roles as academic mothers limit pathways of mobility. Our stories make visible how these limitations—amidst the pandemic—exacerbate positions of precarity for academic mothers, especially those with young children.

Nelson emphasizes the need to bring children to the forefront in order to move forward: "Post-pandemic futures must acknowledge the central place of children in our society rather than treating them as simply an inconvenience that must be managed" (2021, p. 295). Nititham asks that colleagues move beyond performative gestures for a more inclusive and "culturally responsive climate" for ladder-rank faculty and contingent staff (2022, forthcoming). Although the existence of online platforms and communication is essential to both our advocacy work and personal connections, we need others to join our efforts by taking steps toward meaningful action. Strategies include working through existing structures to address equity issues. Ocloo, in her approaches for wider and multi-faceted practice for more equitable co-production of health and social care with diverse communities, urges us to review who is involved in key decision-making (2021). We extend these calls with a list of interrelated requests for allies to move beyond performative allyship to help those in untenable situations. Below are just a few ways to do this work:

Stop Performative Allyship and Do the Work Starter Pack

1. If you have the institutional power to change things, change things.
2. Prioritize care and care work. Recognize that your individual self is part of a village that needs your help.
3. Reflect deeply about workload and stop comparing who has it worse or better. Pick up extra committee assignments, help with administration, pack an extra meal to share with a struggling colleague.
4. Show awareness about your colleagues' additional emotional and physical labor duties. Caregivers, especially those tending to young children, family members, ailing parents, and so on are more tired after breaks or weekends. Offer an hour or two of your time to give them a break (e.g., take their kid(s) on a walk).
5. Collaborate with secure or privileged colleagues to demand professional development funding for caregivers, retroactive pay, schedule and teaching modality flexibility, course releases, and student workers *and* TAs as graders.
6. Stop writing emails that only pontificate. Use that time and energy to help your colleagues *and* partners with work and/or reproductive labor where needed.
7. If you or your department writes a statement in support of a cause or to bring visibility to an issue, follow up with specific action items.
8. Instead of sending articles to your faculty related to the burden caregivers are suffering, do something, like lighten our loads, reassign committees, lower course caps for a few semesters.
9. Schedule only necessary meetings. Avoid scheduling during drop-off or pick-up times or after childcare hours.
10. Volunteer to take notes during meetings.
11. Call out performative white allyship. Example: if your colleague makes a point and she is ignored, or someone else repeats or appropriates it later, interrupt and say: "she already said that."
12. Shut up once you've made your point.
13. Reframe your empathy. Instead of saying, "I had kids thirty years ago. I totally get it," say, "What errands can I run for you?"
14. Stop putting overrepresented groups in leadership positions. Support minoritized people to prevent the glass cliff phenomenon.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put us in a position where we all had to rely solely on digital platforms and, as such, it has heightened pre-existing problems in the neoliberal university. By combining feminist autoethnography and concrete recommendations, we move toward storied, embodied action. Because our stories are not just our own, but some of many, we aim to make visible the challenges that became exponentially difficult for faculty caregivers during the ongoing pandemic. We need colleagues and the administration to do the work, as we cannot continue to do it alone. We are not pleading; we are demanding change.

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Building a Virtual Village: Academic Mothers'* Online Social Networking During COVID-19

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Motherscholar Collective

For those navigating parenthood while employed at institutions that have historically excluded women and non-binary people, virtual spaces can provide more accessible social supports than those available in-person; this

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can be especially true for mothers*[1] who have disabilities, who are parenting children with complex medical needs, or who are facing other related constraints (Baker & Yang, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic put a

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[1] We understand the terms "mothers*" and "mamas*" as inclusive and encompassing to all who identify as mothers parenting a child including those who are non-cisgender, non-binary, or have gender identities other than cis-women.

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spotlight on social media as a means to create "a village" that provides powerful social support and community (Saud et al., 2020).

Prior research shows that virtual spaces and the resulting interactions can trigger innovations such as the emergence of new types of networks and ways of collaborating (Motherscholar Collective et al., 2021). The impact of these spaces may be particularly significant for virtual groups based on shared social identity (Day & Pennell, 2020; Pennell, 2018). However, more research is needed to understand how these spaces can be created to ultimately be accessible, safe, and collaborative, especially for those experiencing marginalization in everyday interactions, including the workplace. This was particularly urgent in 2020 for Black Americans who were (and are) facing a "dual pandemic" of racist systemic violence along with disproportionately high death rates due to COVID-19 (Lipscomb & Ashley, 2020). Given these issues, how can networking in a virtual space build a village?

The Motherscholar Collective, a research collective of academic mothers with young children, has been exploring the intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1990) of academic mothers as well as how those identities are formed and enacted in virtual spaces since early in the COVID-19 pandemic (Azim & Salem, 2022; Blanks Jones et al., 2021a, 2021b; Lim et al., 2021; Motherscholar Collective et al., 2021; Motherscholar Collective et al., in press; Pennell et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2021). The research Collective grew out of a larger "Academic mamas* with babies due or born in [a specific year]" social media group in response to calls for research on pandemic-related experiences. As the Collective grew, it has added members with young children who are not members of the original social media group but who share the identities of being scholars and mothers to young children (born within two years before and three years after the original group members' babies). Furthermore, these new members were added with the approval of current Collective members to ensure all voices were taken into account. The Motherscholar Collective grew out of the support found in the Academic mamas group: just as with mothering, the members sought support for research and seeing opportunities to join forces to collectively give voice to the experience of mothers during the pandemic. The Motherscholar Collective has grown and broadened its research focus to issues beyond the pandemic.

In this study, the Motherscholar Collective focused on the original academic mothers social media group. This group was specifically created by and for "Academic mamas*" with babies due or born in a specific year, and existed prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. While U.S.-based mothers are overrepresented, the group contains approximately 745 members from a number of countries around the globe. Though this online group was established before COVID-19, the pandemic reinforced members' needs for the group's support as, given the parameters of the group, all members were mothers to very young children at the pandemic's start. Further, as the pandemic influenced every individual's lived experiences, the pandemic also influenced the social norms (re)produced in the community. For example, the pandemic-induced isolation that members experienced resembled, in many ways, the social isolation of the postpartum period, particularly the newborn stage, which involves limited mobility and reduced contact with people other than close family and friends (Azim & Salem, 2022). Some members were experiencing these types of isolation simultaneously, or had recently emerged from the postpartum phase when the pandemic struck in early 2020. Thus, the pandemic made the support and information sharing within the group particularly impactful for its members, building a strong virtual village–and providing a powerful case study of the potential for online spaces to cultivate community and to enhance and protect well-being.

In the present study, we conducted a qualitative analysis examining the needs of individual group members, their shared experiences, and group members' willingness to interact, especially as mediated by the group moderators. We investigated how the group's guided virtual interactions created the conditions for reciprocity, using the concept of social capital. Specifically, we focus on how these moderating decisions have cultivated a "safe space" in which members of the group—especially those with marginalized and racialized identities—are able to find support and community.

Theoretical Framework

Social capital is a multilayered framework that defines trust and reciprocity within groups (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Social capital can be separated into structural, relational, and cognitive categories (Claridge, 2018), all of which are used to frame the present study. Cognitive social capital refers to "values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and social norms" (Krishna & Shrader, 1999, p. 10) and describes the resources of shared interpretations, representations, or meaning systems within groups (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), including virtual groups (Duncan et al., 2019).

Cognitive social capital is a term typically used to refer to the more relational, less tangible dimension of network ties, meaning, "what and how people think and feel" (Claridge, 2018, p. 1). Communication efforts in a social network, such as the creation of shared language and narratives, strengthen social bonds by providing a shared reality and goals for members of a network (Lee & Jones, 2008).

As a virtual network guided by the work of moderators, cognitive social capital becomes a key concept for analysis as online members' relationships are quite literally shaped by language, words, and narratives on screen. For instance, moderators' management of interactions (social media posts and responses) among members established rules or norms for expression and engagement. We used cognitive social capital to make sense of the shared values of the social network moderators, whose actions directly affected the experiences of the group members. Structural social capital is formed through network connections or social structure, including the roles within a group, and allows group members to access and exchange information (Claridge, 2018). Finally, relational social capital speaks to the type and quality of relationships within a group (Claridge, 2018). Therefore, we conceptualized relational social capital as an outcome of structural social capital, which is shaped by the cognitive social capital of the moderators and the virtual community, as assembled.

Emotional support, information sharing, and community protection are particularly important forms of social capital operating within online communities for mothers of young children (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; McDaniel et al., 2012; Valtchanov et al., 2014). Within a social media group for academic parents, these concepts may be put into practice through the sharing of information related to parenting, children's wellness, and work. The social media group allows members to share their knowledge with others, which becomes critical for building the norms and trust of a community. During a pandemic, sharing health information, scientific as well as experiential, becomes important cognitive social capital—as well as offering the tacit benefit of bringing together a vibrant (virtual) community during a time of social distancing.

Therefore, in this study, we examined moderators' decision-making processes in creating and maintaining a safe online space as those who have a direct role in community protection in relation to the exchanges of emotional support and information-giving among its members. We particularly focused on moderator decisions which were intended to create safe conditions for mothers with marginalized identities. Social identities are complex and are rooted in intersecting systems of power and oppression (Crenshaw, 1990), and we recognize that privilege and marginalization is not experienced identically by members who share a specific social identity (e.g., being white), but who may differ on other social identities (e.g., holding a tenure-track job, or being queer). With attention to the intersectional reality of social identity, power and oppression, and the nuance this brings to the experiences of individual members, we use the terms "marginalized" and "privileged" identities to call attention to the positions of power held by some members of the group, and to the workings of privilege and oppression (re)produced in the online community. Specifically, we refer to mothers with "privileged identities" as those who occupy one or more social positions of power, including those who are white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, financially secure, documented, and employed—and in some contexts, specifically those holding tenured or tenure-track academic positions. We refer to mothers with "marginalized identities" as those not occupying one or more social positions of privilege. Many members occupy both marginalized and privileged identities. As social capital can create emotional support and facilitate access to resources, its development can be particularly impactful for members of disadvantaged or marginalized groups (Byatt et al., 2019; Duncan et al., 2019; Gerich & Fellinger, 2012; Novich & Garcia-Hallett, 2018); as such, moderators' motivations and actions that enabled the development of social capital in the online group were of particular interest.

To gain further insights, we also solicited and analyzed member narratives. Respondents disclosed their feelings about and experiences within this virtual community, including their ability to access information, trust members in the group, use cooperative behavior, and engage with norms of reciprocity (Gausman et al., 2020; Strange et al., 2016). In our analysis, we relied heavily on cognitive and structural social capital in reviewing the decision-making processes and reflections of the group moderators and drew particularly upon relational conceptualizations of social capital as we considered the member narratives.

Methodology and Analysis

Our qualitative study used two approaches for data collection: collaborative autoethnography (CAE) and narrative inquiry. We utilized CAE (Chang et al., 2016; Hernandez et al., 2017) to frame how a shared social media group for academic mothers with young children shapes and is shaped by our individual experiences, and how our collective storying of expectations, interactions, and feelings of membership and equity are reinforced, juxtaposed, and interwoven. Autoethnographies provide researchers with the tools for reflecting upon, analyzing, and making meaning of their individual truths and experiences within greater sociocultural contexts (Ellis et al., 2010). As an added benefit, the CAE approach captures the multivocality of the authors' uniquely situated, complex, and varied experiences as motherscholars between privilege and marginalization, as they navigate the spaces of motherhood and academia alone and together during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CAE allows us to connect the "personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), which has been a central point in discourses around motherscholarship (Lapayese, 2012; Matias, 2011). In this way, our methodological choice allows us to intentionally and reflexively highlight the structural barriers that mothers, particularly those in higher education with young children, have faced. Conversely, the self-exploratory nature of CAE also opens up conversations around the supportive and empowering spaces motherscholars create (Motherscholar Collective et al., 2021), which work against the institutional constraints of academia.

While the collective autoethnographic notes capture the authors' experiences as members of an inclusive online space, we used narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005) to examine the experiences of the moderators supporting this academic mothers group. Narrative inquiry focuses on individuals' experiences, ideas, opinions, and their interpretations of events (Chase, 2005) while simultaneously allowing researchers to interrogate the complex, layered social discourses through which these experiences are informed. Because social media spaces are cultural microcosms of the partial, entangled, and complex identities of their users, we examined the roles moderators played in shaping this academic mothers online group. Specifically, we used narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005) to capture the moderators' motivations, intentions, and decision-making processes in managing the group.

In both the members' autoethnographies and the moderators' personal narratives, we utilized short, open-ended prompts to elicit responses. Both protocols were approved by an institutional review board, and all participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Data collection began with an unstructured (recorded) Zoom conversation, in which the members collaboratively discussed their personal experiences as users of the academic mothers group. In this conversation, the authors developed prompts collectively which they individually responded to after the initial meeting. Group moderators were also sent open-ended prompts to respond to individually. Due to the small number of moderators for the online social group, detailed demographic information was not requested to maintain their privacy from the authors, many of whom are also group members. Three (of six) moderators submitted personal narratives using self-selected pseudonyms. Nine group members, who were assigned pseudonyms by the authors, participated in the CAE. The moderators and other participants are all cis-women, are mostly white (which mirrors the composition of the larger group), include diverse sexual orientations and numbers of children, and represent a variety of career stages from PhD candidates to mid-career academics (see Table 1).

Therefore, while the personal narratives and CAE notes were produced by a diverse set of individuals, the direct data collected is not representative of the true diversity of the wider virtual community.

Three authors participated in the formal coding process of the personal narratives and CAE notes, comprising three rounds of coding. Three coders were utilized in order to allow for interrater consensus-building and to

Table 1 Study Participants: Online Social Group Members Self-Reported Demographics

Pseudonym	*Gender*	*Race*	*Sexual Orientation*	*Disability & Mental Health Status*	*Number of Children*	*Career Status*
Cedar	Cis-woman	White	Lesbian	Able-bodied	1	Early career
Aspen	Cis-woman	White	Lesbian	Depression & anxiety	1	Mid-career
Magnolia	Cis-woman	White	Straight	Premenstrual dysphoric disorder	2	Early career
Acacia	Cis-woman	White	Bisexual	Depression & anxiety	3	Early career
Birch	Cis-woman	White	Straight	Able-bodied	2	PhD candidate
Ash	Cis-woman	White	Straight	Able-bodied	2	Mid-career
Willow	Cis-woman	Black	*	Able-bodied	3	*
Juniper	Cis-woman	White	Bisexual	*	3	Mid-career
Elm	Cis-woman	Black	Straight	Able-bodied	2	Postdoc

*Information not disclosed

establish the rigorousness of the findings (Cascio et al., 2019). The authors selected for coding had prior training and expertise in qualitative analysis. First, the coders analyzed the moderators' and members' responses in one round of initial open coding done individually. Next, they engaged in values coding (Saldaña, 2021), which allowed them to focus on beliefs, values, and behaviors expressed by the group members and moderators, directly related to social capital. In an additional coding round, they employed versus coding (Saldaña, 2021) to analyze the experiences of members and moderators as compared to their interactions outside this social media group. The three authors then discussed their codes and used axial coding (Blair, 2015) across the two data files to sort codes into broader categories. The concepts of cognitive, structural, and relational social capital, including their elements and characteristics, guided the categorization of data into themes. The findings were then discussed and fleshed out with the larger author group.

Findings

Several themes emerged from the coding process: (1) gatekeeping efforts established accepted ways of interacting in the group based on trust and accountability that created structural social capital; (2) cognitive social capital formed from the perception of shared values contributed to the creation of a safe space (Arao & Clemens, 2013) allowing group members—though some more than others— to engage in authentic and transparent acts of learning; and (3) the relational social capital generated within the social media group created profound experiences of trust and reciprocity. Overall, our analysis suggests that virtual communities created within social media networks can generate social capital, though some group members may benefit more than others depending on their level of activity in the group as well as the power and privilege associated with their social identities. We outline our findings along the axis of social capital identified from the literature: structural, cognitive, and relational.

Structural Social Capital: Establishing Accepted Ways of Interacting

One of the most meaningful ways that moderators influenced the functioning of the group was through acts of gatekeeping which established community and posting norms. This was identified by moderators and members as a valued practice that maintained a welcoming and safe space, particularly for mothers with marginalized identities, specifically mothers of color. The focus on mothers of color's safety increased following the highly publicized murders of Black people by police in 2020 and other anti-Black acts of violence, which were publicly protested in 2020. The moderators' gatekeeping took several forms (as elaborated below), which established trust between members, extended community protection, and modeled online posting behavior that was eventually adopted by members themselves.

Establishing Posting Norms

While not universal, a common practice undertaken by members of the group has been to begin posts in the virtual space with a "content warning" or "subject statement" to identify the post's topic(s). This allowed members to choose which content to engage in, and allowed for structural capital development. The group included such "content warnings for illnesses, financial privilege, assault, etc.," but also for a wide variety of (less problematic) topics as the practice evolved. This norm "helps to maintain an environment that is healthy and conducive to supportive dialogue and relationships" between members from varying social backgrounds and positions (Willow). As Acacia noted, the "group has largely decided that [content warnings] were appropriate to help people engage or disengage with certain topics. I certainly found it very helpful not to consume too much information on specific topics (at some point especially COVID-related) because it was overwhelming me with anxiety." Willow also wrote that this has helped point out how many things "might be a trigger to some people," indicating that overall the members are mindful that some topics may be sensitive to others. As members embraced these norms, they demonstrated care for other members and signaled how others can more effectively engage with them in their responses.

Another group norm was an expectation of member accountability for their posts and an expectation to follow through in posting. Importantly, the form this particular norm took varied widely including but not limited to engaging in dialogue, self-correcting posts when a member pointed out harm was done, or using posts to share resources. For some mothers with racially marginalized identities, demonstrating the link between structural and relational social capital, these posting norms allowed the group to feel safer than other majority-white social media groups. For example, Willow, a Black woman, felt that

> in other mostly white groups, I often feel invisible and receive few responses to my posts; however, in [our] group, mothers follow up and go through lengths to make sure other mothers are okay…I often don't feel supported by white women so this is a new experience for me and it seems that there is intentionality around being inclusive in a way that is not just performative.

Some mothers of privileged identities were compelled to become more active in their posting as a show of engagement, and acknowledgment of the labor that other mothers, often of marginalized identities, produced. Birch, a white woman, noted that while she has witnessed "really difficult conversations … [about] racism, raising anti-racist kids, [and] mothering while Black" in other groups, in "our group I feel like there's been more heart. I see people take action."

Another group norm that created accountability was not engaging and "scrolling on" (Acacia) unless the potential response aligned with the spirit of support requested by the original poster. As Elm wrote, sometimes she would see "an interesting post" and have "lots of thoughts," but instead of immediately commenting, she would ask herself, "What is this mama needing or looking for?" and determine whether her potential responses would—or could—be helpful in that context. For many group members, this norm took the form of scrolling past content and topics with which they disagreed (this functional norm also demonstrates another value of the "content warnings" or "subject statements" utilized within the community). As several members wrote, this practice, implicit and normalized in the community, is not something they have experienced in other social media groups; in other groups, even if such an expectation exists, it may not be actively enforced. Acacia noted that this norm "has developed in this group, particularly when people are reminded by moderators that they can choose to read and learn instead of talk out of place when they don't have a helpful comment." Aspen offered an example of this phenomenon in regards to infant sleep training: "[If] a mama wants support for sleep training, only the mamas with experience in that area responded," which is "such a nice and welcome change from parenting groups where arguments…become passionate or even hostile."

Establishing Community Protection: Building a "Safe Space"

The most common way that gatekeeping was identified was through moderators' "clear, transparent consequences so everyone knew how something would be handled" (Forest) when norms, such as those outlined above, were violated. According to Forest, posting “norms were focused on creating a safe space for mamas with marginalized identities…over the comfort of our non-marginalized members.” These norms, and particularly the underlying value of maintaining a safe space for mothers with marginalized identities, were frequently mentioned by members who perceived the moderators as consistent and quick in their responses to posts that violated these norms. Others noted that, “when someone said something problematic, … the mods [moderators] immediately stepped in with action steps” (Cedar) and pointed out that they used “affirming language to keep the conversation as open-minded and inclusive as possible” (Acacia). Magnolia confirmed that the “boundaries…made it a safer place…because [members] know [they are] going to get the type of support that [they] want as opposed to receiving a lot of advice when [they] truly just want to commiserate or vice versa.” The visible, swift, and consistent moderator engagement with norm-violating posts worked to make visible the expected community norms of the group and strengthen the value of community protection.

To support the moderators’ shared value and goal of prioritizing the needs of marginalized members, the moderator team sought to purposefully diversify. Asking marginalized group members to become moderators reflected the existing moderators’ desire to include diverse viewpoints and “to make sure [the team’s] viewpoint is not solely from white women” (Forest, moderator). Nevertheless, the move toward greater administrative diversity did not come without its own challenges: Tess noted that she “thinks it would be helpful to have more diversity on our mod team, but then there’s a balance of overburdening members with marginalized identities who already have to do a lot of similar unpaid labor.” In fact, research shows that scholars of color are often tokenized within academia for performative diversity and then expected to take on additional service obligations to be the “representative voice” for marginalized racial-ethnic groups (Niemann, 2016) while also engaging in anti-racist activism on behalf of their children and communities (Garrett, 2021). Taken together, the structural capital cultivated through moderators’ and other members’ gatekeeping allowed the development of both cognitive and relational social capital, as discussed next.

Cognitive Social Capital: Shared Values Creating Space for Authenticity

The gatekeeping and establishing of norms by the moderators of the group also created a safe space for members due to a self-selection process resulting in all group members sharing a similar educational background. The name of the group, which calls for "Academic mamas" with babies born in a specific year, encourages only a particular kind of member to join, which ensures alignment with values (higher education) and experiences (cohort of children). This helps to create a safe space where both the professional (academic) and personal (mother) can be on display, discussed, and shared in a safe way. The shared academic identity offers a diversity of perspectives, experiences, and opinions in a number of fields relevant to parenting, such as health, child development, and education. Thus, the group provides a safe space for more passive learning (through reading a variety of perspectives from shared professional and personal commonalities, rather than actively posting or interacting with others on a topic) engaging in emotional and intellectual labor, and sharing information and resources.

Creating a Learning Environment

The safety and comfort established by gatekeeping efforts also established conditions for authentic learning. Members learned crucial information about parenting by having the ability to post questions and solicit responses by content experts and those with lived experience as parents of young children and/or academics, as well as peruse posts by using the built-in search tool. Importantly, lived experiences based on marginalization were not asked for by members with privileged identities. Due to both moderator gatekeeping and the members' shared commitment to maintaining a safe space, white group members were generally conscientious about not asking for emotional labor from women of color on topics of race. Instead, white members created posts to share reading lists, anti-racism tools, and other resources as appropriate.

Beyond seeking information and resources about parenting, members also solicited support in navigating various academic challenges. Much of this learning within the social media group dovetailed with the research group (the Motherscholar Collective) formed as a way to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Birch, a PhD candidate, reflected that the Collective's

> research helped me to recognize the gaslighting happening in academia now, "the world should be normal now," when nothing is normal for mothers and parents…I even recognize things that I used to accept as normal, [like] that "I shouldn't bring my identity as a mother to work"…[is] unacceptable and unsupportive of motherscholars.

In the process of learning about these concerns inherent in the group's composition, members gained access to broader views on their own concerns and awareness of issues they may not have considered.

While the established structural and cognitive social capital created a safe space for members to openly discuss, "difficult" topics, narratives suggest that this learning happened more for white and heterosexual members. Many of the white women (Acacia, Birch, Cedar, Juniper, and Magnolia), wrote about learning from conversations about race from women of color. Acacia feels that while she has "various privileges" impacting her experiences, "the group has made me think … more critically!" She elaborated, "it's progressive learning and unlearning, and I am grateful we have this space where members are allowed to learn and unlearn together without doing it at the expense of minoritized folks." Sexual orientation and gender identity was another topic members mentioned learning about. Magnolia recalled how a conversation about bisexuality "helped [her]…to see some of the privileges and assumptions [she] makes about other couples who have a male and female in [the] relationship." Juniper wrote that she's "in a white/cis bubble sometimes" and learns from the diversity of the online group, something echoed by the other white cisgender members.

This learning, and the subsequent conversations, resulted in members with marginalized identities feeling safer within the group. Elm remembers that as a new member, she posted an article about how white parents need to support Black children. She thought at the time, "I'm going to post this article and see what happens. If there are negative responses, I'll know this is really just another space where people pretend to get it, but really don't." Elm was pleased with the immediate "supportive messages that started a conversation on the work white mamas must do to end systemic racism." Additionally, some "mamas created a separate thread to curate a [children's anti-racist] book list…[so that] black mamas who may be reading my thread for solidarity and comfort [wouldn't] feel as though they had to do the work of educating white mamas." Willow, a Black woman, felt that "individuals hold one another accountable by calling them in if someone makes a statement that is insensitive or bigoted towards a minoritized group" and noticed "efforts are made to include multiple voices in decisions made about/by the group." According to human rights educator Dr. Loretta Ross, calling someone out focuses on shaming them, often publicly, for expressing bigoted or stereotypical viewpoints whereas calling in has the goal of "speaking up without tearing down" (Ross, 2019), often done privately; "a call out done with love" (Bennett, 19 November 2020, para.15). Aspen, a white lesbian woman and the gestational parent of her child, wrote that, "early on … [she] noticed that there were lots of posts about husbands and fathers" which made it difficult for her to "join in the conversations that seemed so heteronormative." She noted there has been a change, as "there are more [discussions] that refer to 'partners' and discuss relationships in more nuanced ways." Cedar concurred, writing "the group members are great at…noting when things are cis- or heteronormative." Overall, adherence to moderators' posting guidelines and the primacy of members' shared values maintained the group as a safe place for members with marginalized identities to discuss their experiences.

Relational Social Capital: A Transformative Community

The structural and cognitive social capital facilitated by the moderators enabled relational social capital amongst the members to develop in the form of profound experiences of trust, reciprocity, and support.

Fostering Trust and Reciprocity

As demonstrated above, members reported the ability to bring their whole self to the collective and feel valued, supported, and validated during a time of great stress from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the dual pandemic for members of color created by systemic racism. The group was created before the COVID-19 pandemic began, and members wrote with gratitude about the connections they formed during the newborn stage of parenting. Because there was "a shared experience on a personal and professional level with other group members" (Ash) the members felt a "common thread [that gave] a unique knowledge of the challenges faced as well as an appreciation and respect for others in the group." Cedar specified that despite being in different academic career stages, "all know the basic pressures of the job." Additionally, "I knew I could post something at 3 am and someone in one of the many time zones represented in our group would be awake too and offer sympathy for being awake with a newborn." This consistent support was important to the motherscholar members.

The pandemic exacerbated members' need for support and some felt they relied on each other more. Ash explained that, "over the course of the pandemic I've lost contact with many local friends (who are not part of the group) because we have different amounts of risk we are willing to accept when it comes to COVID. The Zoom meetings with those from the group are the only [times] I've interacted…in a social setting aside from my family and co-workers." At times, support for each other went outside of comments and posting and became material support when mothers asked for help or posted about a difficult situation, and other members offered and organized help through sending money, food, toys, or other needed items. Acacia was one member who received support, writing that "when my family and I were in isolation after contracting COVID and I was pregnant and completely unable to parent my toddlers, it was incredible to see the outpouring of support, the packages of hydration, the toys that would keep the kids entertained, [and] the meal delivery gift cards." Like Ash, Acacia also formed "a friendship with a group member who lived in the same city and came to bring home-made food and play with us through the window in the middle of winter in the snow."

Having 24/7 access to a support system, shared personal and professional experiences, social outlets, accountability to contribute as opposed to passively scrolling, and material and emotional support created a strong sense of trust and reciprocity. At a time when many people experienced pandemic-related struggles such as health, housing, and childcare crises, the group's organization in relieving these strains became an anchor and a lifeline. The strength of this is seen as some members moved from asynchronous interactions on social media to synchronous, live interactions on Zoom or even in real (socially distanced) life. As members began to know each other better through the group interactions, it became significantly easier to develop deeper, more personal relationships, as there was already a connection.

As discussed in the CAE narratives, the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with another pivotal point in the journey for the mothers in this study, postpartum, a time marked by great vulnerability and a need for healing. Recognizing her own early signs of depression, renowned author on postpartum nourishment care Heng Ou et al. (2016) reminds her readers that even the healing of the individual body relies on the knowledge and support of the village:

> I reached out to girlfriends to request urgent help. These women became my family in this time–a village of sorts–and with their deliveries of food and help around the house, and their gentle companionship, my body, mind, and spirit began to warm up.

During the swift pivot to virtual life, when the members of this group most needed the warmth of in-person gathering, this online group provided an outlet for academic mothers to combat the social distancing that stems from isolation. The gatekeeping efforts of the moderators and willingness of the most active members to adhere to the group's stated values (rules/norms) created a space where members could "warm up" to acquiring new knowledge about parenting, and build trust and reciprocity, which are foundational to the development of social capital. Again, while this virtual village was already established prior to the pandemic, COVID-19 brought the group closer together due to an increased need for support.

Discussion

This study investigated how virtual spaces can build a village—a support network and community—for individuals, especially those that have been traditionally excluded in real-world contexts, such as the workplace, and for those with marginalized identities. The focus was on understanding academic mothers that were moderators or members of a social media group focusing on their identities as both parents and academics. The findings from this research shed new light on how these supportive virtual spaces can emerge and can be nurtured through the creation of social capital.

Theoretical Implications

Our findings show that social capital in this online group was built upon a foundation of emotional support, information-sharing, and community protection (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; McDaniel et al., 2012). The conscious efforts by moderators and members strengthened the reciprocal relationships and trust between members of the group. As shown in the narratives from members and moderators, this social networking group provides psychological and practical benefits, and as such, the members work hard to contribute to it (Williams, 2006).

Moderators' labor–their time, energy, emotional fortitude, and attention to group dynamics–was key to developing the structure for the group to form the networks and access to build social capital. At the same time, the sense of shared values (cognitive social capital) that developed among some of the more active members, including some of the authors may have been forged out of necessity as many members lost access to support networks during the pandemic. Though our data does not demonstrate that the members of the group hold shared values overall, it does demonstrate a shared value for the existence of the group and, further, a shared commitment toward collective, mutually supportive action(s) aimed at maintaining the integrity and cohesion of the group–especially during a time of social isolation and distancing. In this way, the COVID-19 pandemic simultaneously created a context that challenged the capacity of group members to build a mutually safe space and yet also made the creation of such a space a kind of necessity, as the development and maintenance of the group emerged and solidified in the midst of shared crises: academic and (double) pandemic mothering.

Because of the losses experienced in the pandemic (including childcare and socialization outside the home), the group was not merely a trivial online space, but served instead a much-needed village. Building and maintaining the virtual village, a community of academic mothers, demanded that members provide care and attention to each other, even across differences of identity, privilege, and experience. Creating and maintaining the community necessitated learning new ways of being together. The cognitive and relational social capital elements of learning, trust, and reciprocity in the group stem from the foundation built by the community protection and posting norms (structural social capital) as well as the moderators' cognitive labor. Members felt safe in the space to either directly engage in learning through interactions with others or from more private learning by reading what others have posted on a topic. Trust in the community facilitated several key functions of the group, such as making space for the discussion of complex ideas, showing vulnerability when talking about topics members want/need to learn more about, and "calling" each other "out/in" (Ross, 2019, p. 2).

Future Research

While the research presented here provides novel and intriguing insights into how accessible, supportive, and inclusive virtual spaces can be created and fostered, there were additional observations that warrant further inquiry.

First, building trust and reciprocity within the group may be limited because these elements are likely strongest for those who are most visible and interactive. In many ways, the dispersion and benefit of cognitive social capital is not equal within the group. For example, the shared identities of group members as academics and mothers may still exclude those who are marginalized in the academy due to race, gender and sexuality, ability, or may find the descriptor "mother" not inclusive enough. Despite the moderators' efforts, we cannot be certain that there are those in the group who choose not to be active participants due to feelings of discomfort. This was addressed in the narrative of Cedar, a lesbian woman, who wrote, "if we have any conservative members, they don't interact so they don't impact how the space feels for me." However, this potential silencing has likely helped members of marginalized identities, who can face discrimination in conservative environments, feel comfortable sharing and being vulnerable. Despite these tensions, many members' narratives expressed appreciation for being able to feel and be authentic.

Further, the membership is predominantly based in the U.S., leading most topics and perspectives to be U.S.-centric. Research on groups not based, or centered on, the U.S. is needed. Does social capital form in the same way in other cultural contexts? How do parenting and career needs differ? Most of the academic conversations were based on U.S. systems of tenure, which are not universal.

Lastly, the need to connect due to COVID isolation is also a function of class and culture. As academic mothers, many in the group have family and friends who are geographically dispersed and not able to contribute to childcare. For members whose financial privilege would have otherwise allowed them to access childcare, the closure of childcare centers and schools at the start of the pandemic produced immense stress and a need for social support. Further, many members discussed the value of the virtual connections formed through the group in a time when social distancing and remote work was widespread. While the stress and feelings of isolation produced by the sudden shift to work-from-home are well-documented, it is important to underscore that the ability of many members to continue their employment, and to do so remotely away from the threat of COVID infection, represents a further financial and class-based privilege.

Another avenue for future research is to further investigate the extent to which trust and reciprocity are experienced equally by members of marginalized identities and members of privileged identities in online groups. As expressed in several narratives, a common concern among mothers of marginalized identities is whether they can truly trust those of privileged identities to engage with their perspective, to be accountable when called out or called in for harmful commentary, and to engage in transparent acts of learning. This same concern was not discussed by mothers of privileged identities, suggesting that while cultivation of social capital was largely successful in this online group, the online environment is not inherently free of the dynamics of power and oppression that exist off-line. Based on our findings, we contend that the equity of trust and reciprocity may be threatened if members with privileged identities assume a collusion between their privilege and the group's "keep scrolling" norm, rendering them immune from comments challenging their perspectives. However, the group has faced that potentiality head on with the application of consistent moderator intervention on posts perceived to be harmful to members of marginalized identities. Additional work focusing on the online community experiences of mothers of historically excluded identities is warranted, including those who identify as trans or non-binary. This may provide insight as to how safe spaces that embrace a "keep scrolling" norm may become brave spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013) where members consistently challenge themselves to kindly engage difficult topics. Last, considering the significant effort and labor moderators put into their roles, additional research could also examine what initially drew moderators to the social media group and what has sustained their interest in serving in the moderator role.

Conclusion

Finding a village–a safe and supportive space–is important at any time, but especially so in times of uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research demonstrates how such a village can be built (even) in virtual spaces and among diverse individuals as long as the group shares a salient identity, in this case, identifying as an academic mother. Further, our findings show that building trust and reciprocity is at the heart of creating a vibrant virtual space; the community under study here was established through the collective guidance of the moderators and the mutual cooperation of the community members, illuminating how both structural and cognitive social capital were essential to building the strong, trusting relationships (relational social capital) that form the foundation of this village.

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The First Rule about Writing Group: How a Virtual Writing Group Changed My Trajectory Without Saying a Word

Megan Donelson

When the news of a concerning new virus began to circulate, I was a hard-working Assistant Professor trying to make a big shift in my research: I was setting aside my dissertation topic in composition to pursue a new passion, the rhetoric of pregnancy and birth. My new area of interest was a natural extension of the seismic shifts taking place in my personal life: I was pregnant.

For me, the experience of becoming a mother cannot be separated from the experience of existing during a pandemic and the resulting anxiety, existential crisis, and general upheaval of previously held assumptions about how the world works. Like many scholars, my relationship to academia, to work, and to my research has shifted and continues to shift since becoming a mother. This is a tale about one small way I held on to my passion project and, with the help of a small virtual community, managed to reinvent myself.

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Like many academics, my research took a back seat during the pandemic, as I focused on “pivoting” to online instruction and keeping my growing family as safe as possible (physically and mentally). My daughter (somewhat conveniently) arrived over the summer, and when I returned to campus in the fall of 2020, I tried to ease back into working on my research in the rhetoric of risk in pregnancy. It was a pleasant distraction from the anxiety of teaching in-person in a time when very few schools were forcing instructors to teach on campus; in my office, I was safe, and I could take off my mask(s), sanitize, and dig into work that might improve the birth and postpartum experience for someone, somewhere, someday.

I quickly discovered that I wouldn’t be able to establish myself in a new area of research by following the same steps I had in graduate school: suddenly, there was no in-person conversation with like-minded colleagues/scholars/mothers. No more lunch dates with my mentor. No more small talk before department meetings. And perhaps worst of all, no networking at the coffee table at conferences. After about six months of little progress in my research, and only after a push from my own mentor (a mother herself), I came to accept that, despite my loathing for Zoom, virtual comradery would have to do. I sent out a call to several listservs and started a writing group of my own.

I was thrilled with the response, and most Friday afternoons in the spring of 2021, I logged into Zoom to silently write/research alongside these brilliant academics. During that one semester, I prepared for and presented at three separate virtual conferences. I was astonished at my success. How had these researchers helped me do all this without actually speaking to each other?

There are a lot of mom groups out there. What makes our group unique, and uniquely beneficial, is that it is not a group focused on mothering. Instead, we are a group of academics researching various aspects of motherhood, particularly the risks related to childbearing. The fact that many of our group members are mothers certainly helps build a sense that this group is a mothering community, but that is not its primary purpose. The fact that we do not discuss or dissect our day to day mothering choices or debate whether or not our roles as mothers and scholars are in opposition to one another is what *makes* this group so beneficial to us as individuals for whom the identities of “scholar” and “mother” are intertwined or overlapping.

I wonder whether academic fathers feel the same need for community. Do they feel the urge to look up while struggling with a difficult passage and see others struggling too? Or is it (as I believe) time management that breaks along gender lines? Do academic fathers feel guilty for leaving the kids at daycare for another hour while they give that proposal one more look before sending it off? Do they face the same pressure to enthusiastically watch a soccer practice (not a game—a *practice*), even when a few hours in a coffee shop would give them the space to conceive an ambitious project? I have suspicions, but not yet answers, to these questions. Regardless, I think that's where the magic of our group was born—at the intersection of mom guilt and academic imposter syndrome (or, as many have argued, sexism, racism, and ableism in academia). Here was a group of scholars researching the very upheaval I had just experienced—the radical collapse of my pre-parenthood identity, bodily autonomy, priorities, and freedom. These people *knew*. I didn't have to explain how hard it was to make time for research, how angry I was at this constant struggle, how debilitating sleep deprivation and postpartum depression and anxiety can be, and how terrifying and vulnerable it feels to be responsible for a tiny human being in a society that treats parents as if the labor of parenting is not essential to its survival. Some of the faces on my screen had lived it, and a few were living it on roughly the same timeline as I was. But even those who were not parents still *knew*. They were actively studying specific parts of the journey I was on and the social, economic, and structural factors that make it so complicated and, in every sense of the word, dangerous.

Our group is not really active anymore, though I occasionally leave a comment on our group Facebook page. Over the summer, I accepted a new position closer to my extended family (a position I was offered in part because of the research I had done with the support of this group), and we moved across the country just after celebrating our pandemic baby's first birthday. In the chaos of teaching new-to-me courses in a new-to-me institution, my research has moved to the back burner, as it must in times of stress (like the third academic year impacted by a pandemic).

The validation, though, and the solidarity are still with me. I live closer to my extended family now, something I desperately wanted as soon as it really sunk in for me that I was becoming a parent. These scholars helped me get here. I am forever grateful to them for their willingness to log on to Zoom and just be there. Each time I steal a few minutes between classes to skim an article or browse CFPs, I think of all those little squares on my monitor, each one a scholar, half of them mothers, typing away, struggling, puzzling, leaning back to stretch, rubbing their temples on occasion, writing together, wasting no time questioning our right or ability to do this sacred work.

“Comedy and Tragedy,” or How We Used Our Group Chat to Fill the Pandemic Care Gap

Elizabeth Alsop, Laurel Harris, Tahneer Oksman, and Lauren M. Rosenblum

Introduction

In a recent article, “Why Postpartum Care Is an Oxymoron,” Elizabeth Alsop (2021)—one of our co-writers—described a situation that is by now too familiar to most American mothers. Partly detailing her own isolating experiences after giving birth, Alsop summed up how so many of us felt in the weeks and months following our children’s births, as though we had “drifted off the map of medical care into some Bermuda Triangle, a literal

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no-man's land populated only by postpartum women" (para. 5). As a result, in isolation and also, too often, in desperation, we found ourselves patchworking support systems: texting old friends; posting on, or lurking in, online social media groups; scanning coffee shop bulletin boards or listservs for local mom groups; paying, when we could, for various forms of postnatal care, from breastfeeding and babysitting to help with sleep training. These are just some of the forms of unanticipated labor new primary caregivers have to take on when there are no clear overarching structures of support in place.

Each of us, as mothers of children now between the ages of four and ten, had experienced this exhausting struggle well before COVID-19 hit, our stories marked by varying degrees of success and, more often, failure. Alsop writes of the local moms' group, whose messages "scared me in their quiet desperation" (para. 13), while Laurel remembers some vague guidance in the form of YouTube videos, and Lauren and Tahneer recall the parenting groups that offered little connection beyond similarly aged children. With families far away or otherwise preoccupied, we were each unable to find the support we needed, though there were the occasional, unexpected bright spots. There was the time, for example, for which Tahneer will always be grateful, when Lauren insisted on walking over to her apartment to give her a hands-on lesson on how to use a breast pump. But we can much more readily recall the tears, anger, frustration, and fear, generally experienced in solitude, or with well-meaning, but equally ignorant, partners. Such connections, after all, depend on knowing when and how to ask for help, not to mention figuring out where to find receptive and generous helpers, who could provide the kinds of knowledge we did not even know we needed.

Fast forward to the pandemic, which also left us all to flail—and in a way returned us emotionally to that postpartum state. Though by this

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point our kids were older and we were further along in our careers, we found ourselves in similarly vulnerable and uncertain positions, not knowing where to turn for support. The group chat we started at the beginning of the pandemic was, in a way, just a new expression of our old patchwork approach to seeking care. This time around, due to our shared experience of desperation, we had more capacity to reflect on how the system was failing us and, in retrospect, had always been failing us. Paradoxically, we could draw on the knowledge gleaned from our earlier struggles, when we had to locate resources as new parents experiencing loneliness and isolation.

We know each other as friends and colleagues through a loose network of New York City graduate schools. Individually, as members of a generation of post-recession academics, we shared the experience of having to jury-rig our professional trajectories in under-resourced institutions. Together, we commiserated over the frustrations of cobbling together careers and maintaining financial stability in a still male-dominated profession that profoundly favored non-humanities academic tracks. Rather than hoarding resources, however, we shared job leads, recommended one another for positions, and even at a few points worked at the same institutions. We were also part of a new generation of academic women with children who, despite our connections to one another, lacked a broader community with which to discuss caregiving in graduate school, or beyond.

In academic circles, we rarely discussed our children. Meanwhile, outside the graduate school context, we had to contend with discourses around intensive parenting and downplay our investments in our careers.[1] And pandemic pressures made this disconnect between work and life feel particularly untenable. These pressures exposed just how tenuous our situations as working parents really were. While the "postfeminist" 1980s and 1990s continued to alert us to certain workplace challenges—notably, the pay gap and sexual harassment—there was little discussion or representation of the difficulties of white-collar working motherhood. The narratives available to us growing up—outside our own narrow, local communities—were limited to popular fantasies. We had the unflappable Clair Huxtable (played by Phylicia Rashad) or a character like J.C. Wyatt (played by Diane Keaton), the hard-charging executive-turned-reluctant-mom in *Baby Boom* (Charles Shyer, 1987) who, unable to maintain her high-powered Manhattan career while mothering, moves to Vermont and starts her own baby food business. She is the ultimate working professional mom, able to have it all—in her bespoke Vermont home, no less.[2]

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[1] See, for example, *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* (written by Elisabeth Badinter (2012)) for more on some contemporary pressures of modern motherhood. As she writes of the past few decades, "Feminist ideology and contraception might have subsequently opened up parameters, but there are now opposing efforts to push women toward a more constrictive model of the good mother" (26). Lisa Belkin's (2022) review of Lara Bazelon's (2022) *Ambitious Like a Mother*—and Bazelon's book (2022)—provides additional historical and contemporary context.

By the time we found ourselves confronting the same dilemma, it was a different moment in the culture. But had things changed all that much? The immediate popularity of the article in *The Atlantic*, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," by Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012) suggested they had not. Here was a woman with a successful, prestigious career, somehow surprising readers with the news that she was still struggling, even with all the resources at her disposal. The embrace of *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg (2013), published a year later, further showed how stuck the culture remained in woefully inadequate individual solutions to structural problems. The fact that heavily resourced, affluent women were dominating the conversation suggested that all of us were in serious trouble.[3] To put it plainly, help was not on the way. And so, we found ourselves at the beginning of the pandemic, turning to online messaging and group texts as a means of seeking some kind of help.

For this article, we all reread the direct messages we sent each other from spring of 2020 to summer of 2021, and then we each summarized several months' worth of these conversations to reflect on what affordances the group chat offered us. What we hope to provide here then is a case study of parenting while academic, one that also acknowledges our privileges and the inevitable limitations of such a case study. As four middle-class, white, cis-het women, based in and around the New York metropolitan area, we represent a hyper-narrow range of identities and experiences. Yet even in our extreme privilege, we still found ourselves confronting the lack of meaningful structural support, from either social institutions or academic ones. There have been many important large-scale qualitative and quantitative analyses of the impact of the pandemic on parents, and on caregivers, especially mothers, and on people of color (see, e.g., Laura Limonic's (2021) research on the topic). This collaborative reflection on our conversation throughout the pandemic is comparatively quite limited. Yet as literature scholars, we are trained to find meaning in even a limited sample, and we hope that this close-reading exercise might further illuminate larger-scale studies of pandemic parenthood. Moreover, while others, including journalist Anne Helen Peterson (2020) and sociologist Jessica Calarco (2020a, 2020b), have been addressing the ways women uniquely experienced the pandemic—by being made to substitute for our country's missing "safety net"—there has to date only been intermittent discussion about the intersections of care work and academic work throughout the pandemic.[4]

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[2] Susan Faludi (1991) writes on *Baby Boom* as one of the "backlash films," an advertisement for motherhood. "An unintentionally telling aspect of *Baby Boom*," she explains, "is its implication that working women must be strong-armed into motherhood" (145).

[3] Helaine Olen (2022) offers an insightful and timely critique of *Lean In* noting that "what *Lean In* also failed to acknowledge is that whatever gains women make are not necessarily secure" (para 7).

This chapter represents our best attempt to retroactively construct where we were during particular moments throughout the pandemic. It will be necessarily fragmented and incomplete. Our goal in sharing this case study is not to be comprehensive or offer any authoritative account of the academic parenting experience, during the pandemic or at any other time. On the one hand, the reliance on one another was an exercise in radical care and collaboration that continues through the writing of this chapter. On the other hand, it exposes the continuing incompatibility of parenting with the promise of academic life, and the failure of academic institutions to provide faculty with the infrastructure that would allow us, in turn, to support our struggling students. Thus, we seek to demonstrate that consciousness-raising might be accomplished through social media and the digital realm via smaller breakaway groups. While we acknowledge the limited long-term impact of such consciousness-raising, we personally have gained courage to argue locally for better support for ourselves, our colleagues, and our students as a result of this group chat.

Our Conversations

Spring 2020

Our online conversation began on March 18, 2020, two days after the public schools closed in New York City. At the time, we knew we would not see our students again that semester. We believed our children might be returning to their schools, even if only for a few weeks at the end of June. But, in truth, no one was fully aware how long this would last. We became focused on the everyday of this strange new world: how to get our classes online, how to provide a shred of stability for our children, how to buy groceries. Our exchanges at first were an attempt to schedule a Zoom call, a means by which to connect to a support network outside of our spouses, and a way to find a break from our children and our work. Predominantly, we were checking in: are you okay? I am fine (and also I am "fine"). We sought distraction but also appreciated those who were keeping us tethered to the moment: Elizabeth reported she became emotional on a Zoom call with struggling nursing faculty; Tahneer acknowledged tearing up when her son's teacher worked to make the students feel connected. We spoke of a lack of resilience, barely managing the everyday so that when siblings fought or children couldn't sleep at night, we broke down over what used to be the simple realities of parenthood. On March 30, we began to note that the pandemic was not the same for everyone. When a colleague asked us to do additional committee work and we had to decline because we were homeschooling children and supporting our students, there was obvious resentment from them. We also understood our own privilege in being able to stay home, with our primary health worries being allergy symptoms and an achy back mistaken as the early signs of illness (that never materialized); our lives and our jobs were not in immediate danger.

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[4] See, for example, Miriam Posner's (2020–2021) tireless work on Twitter calling attention to this intersection throughout the pandemic.

By April 30, we noted the ongoing breakdown of a system that was hardly functioning to begin with. One of us was serving as an administrator of a program whose part-time faculty members were simply disappearing, with no support in place from the institution or anywhere else. On more than one occasion, we noted that students were complaining (because there was too much work or too little professor contact and because it was a pandemic and everyone was struggling and no one knew whether to tirelessly keep going or give up entirely) and that administrations seemed only concerned with student experience, dismissive of faculty members. We noted all the university-led discussions of how faculty can support students, but no one seemed available to support faculty, and certainly not adjuncts or part-time staff. The system had clearly failed the very people who worked to keep it running, yet somehow it kept chugging along gaining momentum, a steam train on electric tracks. Nonetheless, we periodically sought hope, which as we are approaching the reality of new COVID variants, reads now as both foolhardy and heroic. On April 7, Tahneer wrote, "I know I'm being optimistic but I can't help but think that maybe some doors will begin to crack open again: maybe we will return to science and academia and community and other things that are becoming more apparent as necessities. Literature and the arts. A need to make meaning out of life." Elizabeth added: "And there are some auspicious signs—the strikes, for instance. I'm hardly an optimist but I do think some who have never questioned the status quo before are beginning to do so." We read this now with chagrin, but perhaps if we account for our own intensified awareness of where academia still has to go as a result of the pandemic, perhaps there is something to be hopeful for. We were seeking the end of the pandemic, but more than that, we were (and are) readying ourselves to interrupt in whatever way possible the system from blindly moving forward.

Summer 2020

It is fitting that our Summer 2020 exchanges kicked off with a political cartoon drawn by Tahneer's eight-year-old son, since it reflects the group's tendency during this period to use humor to offset our ongoing sense of rage, frustration, confusion, and incredulity. On June 5, Laurel joked that "this is 100 percent a simulated world controlled from somewhere else for lol's," and we all agreed. Or as Tahneer put it, summing up our chat vibes, "comedy & tragedy."

The initial panic of the spring had passed, and we were beginning to acclimate to this new not-normal. We were still gathering on Zoom for the occasional happy hour ("Changing out of my bathing suit and looking for booze!" Lauren reported on June 6), and Elizabeth and Tahneer entertained utopian fantasies of buying land upstate. But we were still on edge and clearly haunted by memories of the pandemic's early months ("lots of sirens today," "helicopters tonight"). We were all still unclear about what it was and wasn't safe to do, and we experienced particular decision fatigue when it came to our kids. "Did I blink and [Governor] Cuomo announced camps today?" Tahneer asked in June, while by August we were all, like her, "waiting-and-seeing" about school. "Never forget," Laurel helpfully reminded us, as we spun out, "every choice is bad."

In June, of course, our concerns about the virus and our families' physical safety collided with the events of that month: George Floyd's murder, the protests and uprisings, and state suppression tactics—topics we touched on, sometimes without directly discussing. Instead, we talked about mitigating risks at Black Lives Matter protests, the NYPD not wearing masks, and the surrealism of the 8 pm curfew imposed in New York.

Then again, we were also, as Laurel acknowledged early on, “#basic” and therefore spent a balance of our time on our everyday concerns: the toll of caregiving, the endlessly extractive nature of academia (“we’ll pay you shit and run you ragged”), and the nuttiness of our colleagues and fellow parents. Life went on, and even in the midst of global calamity, we still did things like have sex talks with our kids (“Between the penis questions and the pepper spray questions today …,” Tahneer writes). And we still found time for petty complaints. As Elizabeth wrote, “Everyone is saying how nice this all is for introverts except I never get to be alone so it’s actually a nightmare??” We encouraged each other to take social media breaks, but struggled since, as Laurel wrote, “My brain is a chaotic mess and [Twitter’s] the only thing that reflects it!”

At the same time, we did our best to take advantage of summer and enjoyed some small pleasures. Elizabeth and Tahneer traveled upstate, while Lauren went for a haircut: “I’m sort of expecting a Kate Plus 8 situation but trying to be optimistic.” (“Mazel tov!” Tahneer replied.) Laurel hiked for her birthday; Tahneer became “kayak obsessed.” We spent time in nature while we could, and braced for fall. “I’m really having a hard time envisioning this year,” Elizabeth wrote, “like, at all.”

Fall 2020

We all *began* the Fall 2020 semester exhausted and demoralized. As we all started teaching remotely, we noted how burnt out we were and reinforced for each other the importance of doing the bare minimum. We complained of being “spent” and “lacking motivation,” gearing up for a “survival” semester.[5] Throughout, we regularly checked in with each other almost every day via direct message. The topic of our conversations ranged from teaching, to the election, to our sense that our employers wanted to extract much more than any of us could possibly have to offer to the kind of workplace chatter (TV shows, weird anecdotes, shared news stories) we weren’t getting anymore. We also shared and praised each other’s successes: Tahneer’s article, Elizabeth’s book contract, Laurel’s tenure, Lauren’s teaching grant. The instability of our children’s schooling and their remote learning was another frequent topic. Laurel was running a preschool pod out of her house while Elizabeth's, Lauren's, and Tahneer's kids were in and out of school, subject to capricious openings and closings and inevitable Covid-19 quarantines. At one point, Tahneer paid a babysitter $25 an hour to play with her sons in the park so she could work. She noted, "I just want to stop all the fucking planning." These conversations are self-reflexive about the support we are giving each other. On Thanksgiving, for example, Elizabeth wrote, "Thankful for you ladies … bright point in a garbage year," and Tahneer reached out on New Year's Eve with "I would never have made it through 2020 without the three of you!" We also connected to each other to make sense of a semester punctuated by one professional and political shock after another to the point where shock became tedious. As Lauren wrote around the time of Amy Coney Barrett's nomination to the Supreme Court, "I've got no panic left."

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[5] Sara Ahmed (2021) describes shared complaint as generative: a “path of more resistance” (7).

Working isolated at home, watching the pandemic proceed grimly through Trumpian farce, we also shared our sense of disassociation. Tahneer asserted that we must be in *The Truman Show*, Elizabeth lamented how "bonkers" this timeline felt and asked if this is the third act of a movie to which Lauren replied she wanted to fast forward to the end. There was a great deal of relief after the results of the election finally came in; Elizabeth and Tahneer attempted to find each other amidst celebrations in Prospect Park while Laurel kept everyone updated with Twitter post celebrations from inside her home in central New Jersey. The semester ended with a kind of settled resignation in our conversations. We discussed how much easier we had been on our students and how this semester had made us care less about high-minded objectives and more about, as Elizabeth wrote in September, "get[ting] my students to pay attention to things." She also noted, and we all agreed, that "academic writing seems so pointless now." One of us turned our collective semester-weary gaze on a colleague of theirs returning from sabbatical who naively asked for teaching tips: "Girl, read the room! We are way past normalized. This is survival mode now."

Spring 2021

With the attempted coup followed by the U.S. presidential inauguration, we had a few more weeks of shock, then celebration, to open the New Year. There was a sense of relief on January 19, even if realistically we knew we were still in the thick of things. Tahneer wrote, "Today at dinner, I said, ‘Kids, guess who is no longer president after today?’; And my five-year-old said, ‘Donald Trump!! That motherfucker!’” There was other news at the end of January, too, to take our minds off the world: Laurel officially had tenure, and Lauren’s son was flourishing at his new school.

Indeed, our interest in discussing politics turned into a close watching of vaccine and vaccination news, particularly in New York and New Jersey, where we all live. While close friends and family members started to receive early vaccinations, we were also hearing about new strains and possible vaccine resistance. Sometimes we’d interrupt our worried conversations to talk about novels and TV shows we were using to distract ourselves (*Bridgerton*, anyone? Or the rediscovered Claude McKay novel?). Eventually, with vaccination numbers ticking at a rate of 0.1 percent a day (in New York), we turned to discussing our children’s schooling issues and our increasing professional malaise.

All our school-aged children had returned to a more regular schedule by the new year, but this new normal was bringing out additional concerns: a blown-up pod; a ten-day quarantine; a message from a teacher about one of our kids undressing during a Zoom meeting (he was feeling too hot!); kids crawling around underfoot as we taught from our bedrooms. Elizabeth wrote, “So L is doing a ‘free verse’ poetry unit and her first poem was about … anger? Not sure if I should be proud or concerned.”

Our central topic throughout, though, seemed consistently to be professional malaise. Teaching difficulties came up—mainly case-by-case scenarios, each of us asking, in turn, for advice about a student or a class. But more consistently we talked about a general distrust of our institutions and a feeling of having been abandoned or taken advantage of. As Lauren wrote, “Academia is weird because there are these supposed (ableist) benchmarks about when it is supposed to be okay to have a family … But like other professions, you have to ‘hide’ your family.” Laurel wrote of post-tenure service pressures, “I mean I also really want to just tap out, read, write, teach, and not do any major service. People have done that. It just seems shitty? Like other junior and mid-career women will just have more slack to pick up.” Elizabeth wrote, “That is my all-time mantra from Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020): ‘the institution cannot love you.’ It’s a hard truth for sure!” Laurel replied, “I’m gonna tell everyone I’m about to have a nervous breakdown as a working parent through Covid.”

It was surprising (or not?) how we spoke almost not at all about our own research projects, perhaps because none of us were able to do much research or if we did, we just didn’t see this channel as the right place to discuss it. There was also limited talk about partners, which also seemed surprising. Many of our conversations about the professional world (conferences, teaching) seemed centered around pre-pandemic comparisons. Were the feelings we had (about the Modern Language Association conference, for example) particular to this year, and its online format, or was this online format just exposing, more powerfully perhaps, what we had already been experiencing for a long time coming?

Conclusion

We have all been friends for over a decade, in occasional contact before the pandemic started, but we had never before interacted regularly as a group of four. We have felt lucky to fall into this small group chat. We each had colleagues at our own institutions and other parents we could commiserate with, but here was a space where we could discuss both academia and parenting with old friends from other schools. This space particularly enabled us to compare notes on the emptiness of our institutions' rhetoric of care. We are all asked to do care work—diversity, equity, and inclusion committee service; student support; faculty mentorship. While our universities emphasize the importance of such work, they also devalue it by refusing to provide those undertaking it with the appropriate compensation and recognition.[6]

Going through our threads, we are reminded how much this devaluation was exposed during the pandemic. In university emails and faculty-wide Zoom meetings toward the end of Spring 2020, we noted there was a tone of toxic positivity: a focus on what to us was an impossible "restart" plan and lectures on remembering to support our students while the university provided us, in turn, with little support. The discussion of layoffs was inevitable but also took on the tone of threat. We needed to fill our courses and loads somehow; we needed to teach courses formerly filled by adjuncts; we needed to fulfill our responsibilities and then some, or we would be the next to go. Somehow, with our degrees in literature, we were also responsible for the university's financial viability.

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[6] For more on the current "demoralized" state of higher education, see Alexander K. McClure's (2021) recent article, "Higher Ed, We've Got a Morale Problem--and a Free T-Shirt Won't Fix It," posted September 27, 2021, which speaks to this problem including and beyond mothers in academia, and shows the widespread nature of these feelings of frustration and unease.

At the same time, staff people with whom we had worked for years were let go. One of us worked with adjuncts who were ill, or whose family was, and could not finish out the term, while also having to inform other adjuncts that there was no work for them. The university response was consistently focused on the student experience and almost never on our own exhaustion and experiences of fear and loss, with the exception of hackneyed reminders to participate in self-care. There was cognitive dissonance surrounding the fact that we were living in a calamity, yet expected not only to carry on but to do better. Why wasn't there more than a superficial recognition of the intensive labor it took to reinvent our courses while attempting to provide some stability for our students? And why, given this labor, hasn't the university acknowledged faculty as the foundation of their mission rather than an expenditure on a constantly updated Excel spreadsheet? Why are we tasked with devising individual solutions to structural problems?

In other words, there was no safe place within our institutions to have public conversations about the challenges we experienced. Our online chat functioned as a judgment-free zone in which to commiserate about the moments we felt too stuck, too lost, that it was all too hard, before dusting ourselves off and entering the fray of Zoom teaching again. University messaging is frustratingly one-sided; our conversations were correspondingly resigned. We coped by sleeping a lot, or not at all; drinking a lot, or not at all; alternating between over-parenting or neglect; working all the time or ignoring emails for mental health; watching bad films; and often ignoring or fighting with our partners. If larger support networks like the Academic Mamas Facebook group risked "context collapse," to borrow danah boyd's (2014) term, and difficulty identifying across discipline, institution type, and employment situation, conversely, we sometimes noticed that the intimacy of our group led us to "preach to the converted," and we wondered, at times, if we were too comfortable or unchallenged in our thinking.

Having mostly returned to in-person teaching this semester, we are in touch less, but count on each other more. The stakes of our relationship seem higher, and our questions are often professional in nature: What is the best way to communicate this boundary? How do we self-advocate in this circumstance? How can we offer students guidance and protect our own time? We also share continuous disappointment as Covid refuses to ebb and our children continue to face challenges after so many months of various levels of isolation. Our tiny community of like-minded women provided a respite from COVID-era isolation, but it also provided a much-needed reminder that it is not only our individual academic lives that are a problem. It's not us, it's them. So, Lauren finds herself gathering her courage and speaking out in a faculty meeting about inequitable assessments of humanities faculty that undervalues their labor; Tahneer seeks to develop her pedagogical practices without further burnout; Elizabeth advocates for herself in a negotiation with an editor; all while Laurel fearlessly leads the production of this chapter. And as we try to move forward (with masks on and vaccine cards in hand), we realize more than ever the intense need for faculty connections beyond the rhetoric of shared governance and among institutions, disciplines, and departments. There is tremendous possibility in what we can learn outside the academy, and from one another, about collaboration, empathy, and the value—and inevitable limitations—of our patchwork of care.

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Kids at the Door: An Autoethnography of Our Shared Research Identity as Academic Mothers in Virtual Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, we (the authors) joined with twelve other academic women from across the globe to form a research collaborative that we named COVID GAP (Gendered Academic Productivity). Our group's composition included members representing various cultures, languages, social statuses, and disciplines. Despite the diversity reflected within our group, we maintained a common identity as women scholars with the shared goal

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to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on scholarly productivity in academia through a feminist lens. Our intention was to conduct empirical research to formally measure the impact of the pandemic on academic women's productivity. While designing our study, we recognized the potential burden of asking participants to engage in qualitative interviews while navigating the pandemic and thus opted to develop and promote an online instrument (with open-ended questions) to inquire about the lived experiences of academic womxn (women, transwomen, and non-binary persons). Participants completed this measure at their convenience. Upon the close of our survey in August 2020, COVID GAP met to assess our data.

We discovered that the breadth of data collected was greater than anticipated. In response, our sixteen-member collaborative formed subgroups to explore one or more elements of the shared collected data. Our subgroup, composed of this chapter's four authors, examined the lived experiences of academic womxn within the context of the pandemic who also identified as partners (Brown et al., 2021) and parents (Bender et al., 2022). Thus far, our work has resulted in the publication of two manuscripts, one pertaining to each of these topics. We are in the process of analyzing data from Phase 2 of COVID GAP's study, which will result in additional publications. Due to our successful collaboration, we have also discussed the possibility of pursuing additional research unrelated to COVID GAP regarding common topics of interest. Our observations regarding differences in our subgroup's output as compared to others within COVID GAP sparked our curiosity pertaining to the conditions that facilitated our productivity. Our collective interest in understanding the dynamics contributing to our success, including an in-depth reflection regarding our journey of learning to communicate, collaborate, and grow professional partnerships in the quest to address our research questions and contribute scholarly research during a period of isolation, serves as the foundation of this chapter.

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Essential to the success of our scholarly relationship has been our shared identity as academic mothers; we share this autoethnography to further explore our experience in virtual collaboration. Through our autoethnographic effort, we seek to “connect the personal to the cultural” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 739) by relating our individual experiences as mothers pursuing professional collaboration with others while navigating the pandemic. This unique exploration of the pursuit of academic collaborations in a virtual environment is provided via our gendered perspective as academic mothers. Although we identify across four different disciplines and hold variable ranks and positions in each of our academic careers, we share a curiosity and commitment as insider researchers to exploring the experiences of our fellow academic mothers. Between us, we are administrators, faculty, adjunct faculty, and doctoral students as well as mothers to eight children, ranging in age from five to twenty-five (and as young as three at the start of our collaboration). We are located across the United States and affiliated with different types of institutions and programs.

To conduct our work together, we coordinated across four time zones, juggling the demands of both our academic roles and motherhood to facilitate the process. In this chapter, we share a summary of our collaborative process coupled with a reflection of our successes and growth areas. We also include an exploration of how social media and various online structures contributed to our individual and collaborative development as mothers, academics, and scholars. The structure of this chapter will open with each of us introducing and socially locating ourselves as academic mothers (firsthand narratives in *italics*) supplemented by a narrative of our individual involvement in online communities leading us to connect with each other via social media, the eventual creation of COVID GAP, and our resulting subgroup. We will also describe our collaboration through the structure of Tuckman’s (1965) Stages of Group Development and conclude with a description of our ongoing exclusively online process with the intention of providing insight into the ebbs and flows of our collaboration, which are primarily impacted by motherhood. Throughout this chapter, we will share the findings from our research analysis and connect them to our own experiences as academic mothers.

OUR GROUP FRAMEWORK: PARTNERS AND PARENTS

Given the diversity of subjects addressed via our online instrument and the quantity of data resulting from it, COVID GAP developed subgroups to explore and analyze specific identities and experiences of our participants (n=101). From the larger research team, the four of us self-selected into a subgroup with a shared interest in understanding academic women's experiences as partners (n=67) and parents (n=51). Each of us pursued our research partnership for different reasons. In her role as leader in her department and a feminist researcher, Kristina was concerned with reports she had seen regarding academic women's status as impacted by the pandemic. In her role as a Women and Gender Studies instructor, Dee Dee, like Kristina, has a background in feminist theory and was eager to learn more about women's experiences. Olga and Sara did not have extensive professional experience pursuing women's studies but were both inspired to join the group due to personal reasons, including the desire to connect with like-minded women who also identified as mothers, academics, and researchers.

We found that despite our differing disciplines, we shared an organizing framework as feminist researchers in our collective desire to give voice to the isomorphic experiences we had in relation to the themes identified by our participants. As insider researchers, it was especially important to utilize our positionality as scholars to highlight why the pandemic exacerbated long-held gender biases in academia (Andersen et al., 2020; Chance et al., 2022; Muric et al., 2020). Further, in speaking out through the use of autoethnography (Brown et al., 2022a), we leveraged our experiences to normalize those of our fellow academic women. For the purpose of this chapter, we continue to lean into these identities as well as connect them to the impact that engaging in virtual communities has held for each of us. In our range of identities as academic mothers, we hope to represent the different experiences of scholars, though we recognize that we are four well-educated, able-bodied women with familial support systems that may be more conducive to our scholarship. Finally, we each identify as white, meaning that we recognize that this narrative lacks black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) representation.

Kristina

Kristina pursued her doctorate in response to familial (patriarchal!) pressures and expectations as well as a desire to expand her professional identity beyond that of clinician as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. *Having given birth to both of my (KSB) children while in my master's program, they were in elementary school by the time I pursued my PhD. My children's own academic timelines were integral to pushing me through my PhD program as we moved from the west coast to the east coast and then to the Midwest once I earned my first academic position. Our goal was to maintain as much stability as possible for them as we moved from state to state. My academic journey also took precedence over that of a very supportive husband who passed up tenure in his own career as a Special Education teacher three times to follow me across the United States. Years later, we are currently empty nesters and my husband is pursuing his own PhD as he looks to move from K-12 to higher education.*

Virtual communities have been a parallel resource and relational support for me for almost thirty years. When I was first married in 1995, I actually started an email digest for YngWives (young wives) and a year later I joined an online group for expecting mothers (Jan97; our due dates were all in January 1997). These two virtual communities have been an integral part of my personal identity development as wife and mother. I developed life-long friendships through both and continue to stay connected to my fellow YngWives and Jan97 parents in Facebook groups. Kristina has long recognized the value of and benefited from online connections and has been able to translate associations made within these virtual communities to real-world relationships.

As the pandemic emerged, Kristina once again turned to social media seeking connections with like-minded women navigating circumstances parallel to her own. *After seeing several informal references across social media and similar venues regarding the decreased scholarly productivity among academic women following the onset of COVID-19, I (KSB) began to wonder about the validity of these claims. My preliminary efforts in spring and summer 2020 to confirm these assertions revealed scant scholarly literature pertaining to the topic, most of which seemed to reflect informal commentary rather than empirical research. Within academia, publications serve as a form of professional currency* (Aiston & Fo, 2020*;* Aiston & Jung, 2015; Brown et al., 2022a). *Given my own position as an academic woman and feminist researcher, I was familiar with the well-documented persistent* *gendered gaps that existed within academia* (e.g., Bodle et al., 2011; Djupe et al., 2019) *as well as the potential impact a drop in women's scholarly production could have* (e.g., Hengel, 2020).

My professional fears about this emerging concern were two-fold: on a global level, a decrease in scholarly production might reduce women's influence within their respective fields, essentially setting women researchers and scholars back decades; while on an individual level, decreased scholarship could compromise a woman's professional standing by delaying or jeopardizing promotion and/or tenure, effectively stunting her earning capacity and potentially impacting other facets of her life. Given the potential implications of these circumstances and my position of privilege as a white academic woman with the rank of full professor (tenure is not available at my institution) and as Department Chair, I sought to formally examine claims regarding women's reduced scholarly productivity within the pandemic with the intention of determining their accuracy and identifying what factors, if any, warranted mitigation to affect this trend. Though my need for publication for advancement was not a motivator, my desire to research and learn and write as well as role model for my students as well as my own kids as they explored career options (in academia!) pushed me to continue to engage in scholarship.

Due to quarantine mandates and in line with most academics, I found myself without access to campus facilities, research tools, or colleagues with whom to meet and collaborate. The impacts of the pandemic challenged me to conceptualize the research process in alternative ways to my previous experiences; yet my long-term identity as a wife and mother connecting across virtual platforms informed my decision to recruit collaborators via social media. Effective in their ability to connect people and provide them with a sense of community, social networking groups are popular venues to seek informal advice, professional insight, and camaraderie (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010).

Sara

With the desire to eventually start a family and the intention to maintain flexibility in her schedule so she could be present with her children, Sara cultivated a career in which she positioned herself so that a majority of her professional work could be eventually completed in a virtual environment. While also working as a clinician, she began teaching in-person and online undergraduate courses in 2005. Like Kristina, Sara was inspired to pursue her doctorate in response to patriarchal pressures combined with her desire to expand her professional opportunities, including the ability to train emerging mental health professionals. *I (SB) became pregnant with my first son while completing my doctoral coursework and serving as a full-time non-tenure-track faculty member. I completed my dissertation, graduated, and earned my tenure-track position while pregnant with my second son. For better or worse, I have always been virtually connected with other professionals while navigating motherhood. My husband likes to tease me that I had my computer in the delivery room with me during the births of each of my sons. My youngest son and I maintained a shared office/nursery space when he was an infant. I do not know motherhood independent of virtual work and connection.*

As the mother of two small boys, I [SB] found myself overwhelmed at the outset of COVID-19 as I tried to balance homeschooling, attending to my sons' mental health, supporting my spouse through his own professional challenges associated with the pandemic, maintaining my family's safety in the face of a deadly virus, and attending to my duties as a faculty member. My students' and advisees' circumstances were also complex, exacerbating my typical professional responsibilities. I was overwhelmed and stressed. In the pursuit of escapism, I scrolled social media and happened upon Kristina's call for collaborators, which I found intriguing; thus, inspiring my response to her post.

Given my status as a tenured faculty member with publications that were in-press at the time of Kristina's call, I had not yet started to worry about the long-term impact of the pandemic on my career. I (naively) hoped that calls for "two weeks to flatten the curve" would be effective and we could all return to some level of normalcy relatively quickly if we followed health officials' guidelines. While concern for my individual publishing pattern did not inspire me to join COVID GAP, my motivations for doing so were not as altruistic as Kristina's reasons for establishing the group, either. I was previously aware of the documented historical trends pertaining to gender-based disparities within academia and publishing, yet they were not under my active consideration at the time, nor had I yet considered how the pandemic may further propel these conditions. My cognitive efforts were generally restricted to considering how I would get through each day. At that point in time, I was unable to see beyond my own circumstances and consider how COVID-19 might broadly impact academia and women's positions within it. Instead, I viewed the call to collaborate as an opportunity to connect with other professional women, to engage my mind, and to stop thinking about my *day-to-day stressors. With an ongoing research interest in bridging disparities within both mental health and academia* via *the use of technology, the topic of focus was a natural fit with my previously established research agenda. The possibility of producing a peer-reviewed publication as a consequence of participating in COVID GAP would be a bonus to me as well, if it should actually happen.*

Due to my extensive experience with online learning and research endeavors, I was confident in my ability to engage with and contribute to COVID GAP effectively via *virtual platforms. I was also familiar with empirical research confirming the efficacy of such pursuits. Despite these circumstances, I found myself initially intimidated by the prospect of joining the group, as I did not know how I would be perceived by academic women outside of my own field with variable publishing and research records. With no previous experience in collaborating on research across cultures, disciplines, languages, and continents, I hoped that I would be accepted by others within the group and that I could contribute to the work effectively. Admittedly, despite my insecurities, joining the group remained a low-risk endeavor. I knew Kristina to be of a higher rank and status than me and could see that she was willing to guide the group. With that, I assumed that deferring to her leadership would help facilitate my success. I was also keenly aware of my career stability at the time and did not feel the need to join the group to ensure I could produce publications to maintain my professional status. With that, I joined the collaborative knowing that if it did not feel like a good fit or was overly stressful to me, I had the ability to separate from it. Following some initial correspondence across group members, I quickly realized that despite the vast differences between the members of COVID GAP, we shared a common understanding of the implicit expectations of academic women that united us in research and allowed us to quickly establish a positive rapport and get to work.*

Olga

Olga graduated with her PhD in International Crime and Justice in 2021. Connection via virtual communities has been an essential element of Olga's journey through motherhood and as an academic. *At the moment of starting my PhD journey, I (OV) had a three-year-old son, and I was four months pregnant with my daughter who, shortly after birth, was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis resulting in many hospitalizations, new routines for everyone, and very serious social isolation. Besides being a partner, graduate* *student, and then an adjunct, I was not only a mom—I became a "medical mom"—who had a lot to learn.* Olga sought connection with other "medical moms" and emerging academics via social media. Similar to Kristina and Sara, Olga also felt isolated with the implementation of COVID restrictions and sought community with like-minded individuals via social media parallel to her previous course of actions when she needed support.

When I (OV) joined COVID GAP, I was a doctoral candidate (today a proud graduate) with no publishing experience. I joined several social media groups years prior while looking for motivation and advice on how to make it in academia, especially as an immigrant whose country's academic hierarchy and associated career paths often looked different than those in the United States. With the unexpected pandemic and what seemed to be a forever quarantine, social media groups were the only outlet for people like myself—those who wanted to finish their dissertations and become scholars. Online I found other individuals who struggled in this very unprecedented time—as mothers, professionals, graduate students, and partners—all while being home and working remotely while simultaneously parenting and meeting needs of everyone around me. Kristina's post seeking collaborators to explore this new phenomenon of academic womxn, mothers, and partners navigating the pandemic caught my attention. I could not help but wonder whether other scholars felt similarly to what I was feeling—a combination of academic isolation, the struggle to write my dissertation with my children playing in the same room, efforts to provide enough attention and time to my partner, all while also teaching as an adjunct at multiple institutions.

After joining COVID GAP and this subgroup in particular, a familiar feeling of being myself again emerged. All four of us were mothers and wives/partners and shared similar lifestyles and struggles during such difficult times around the globe. Our online meetings felt less like work but more like "scholarly induced happy hours" where we shared ideas, discussed our group's future, and also shared personal struggles and triumphs. Failures and successes were addressed with support and a lack of judgment. It is my strong belief that because of our common characteristics/identity, despite working in different fields and being in different places academically and geographically wise, we have managed to always have each other's backs and support one another to the best of our abilities.

Dee Dee

Dee Dee is doing things backward and finally finishing her PhD after working for almost twenty years in higher education. *I (DK) took a non-traditional path into academia. My first job out of graduate school was working in a state-run domestic violence shelter for women and children. Part of my duties included community education. In the early 1990s, there was a big push to train police officers, medical professionals, and other service providers about the systemic issue of intimate partner violence. After a couple of years in this position, I transitioned into higher education administration and teaching because I found myself focusing on the "why" of issues. At my university, our Women and Gender Studies program continued to grow, but instructors were difficult to find. The department had no tenure-track lines, so the majority of us came from other departments and taught one to two classes per semester. My experience with the domestic violence shelter and my prior academic background in political science and education qualified me to teach in this area.*

After her first child was born, Dee Dee left her full-time teaching position to teach part-time exclusively online. In 2006, online teaching was still quite new and some faculty were resistant to its use. Seeing the value of distance education, Dee Dee learned new technologies and became familiar with pedagogical shifts necessary for the digital classroom. She returned to higher education full-time once her daughter started preschool, establishing a schedule that allowed for her to be on campus in the mornings, to pick up her daughter from preschool at lunchtime, and to limit the rest of her teaching responsibilities so that they were completed online or on campus one night per week. *Since Facebook was a relatively new thing then, this is when I (DK) started using social media to keep connected with the world. Even working on campus for parts of the day did not allow for the professional networking and collegiality needed to maintain a career in academia. Baby #2 made an appearance after four years of full-time work. By the end of that year, I made the decision to go back to part-time employment. Since then, I have been working half-time in administration, teaching part-time, and working on my doctorate while raising active and strong-willed young women. I have spent a lot of time feeling like a fraud to some degree because I work remotely, which allows me the time I want for my children, yet I talk about women's issues as my career. I keep moving ahead because I hope that I am instilling in my daughters that they have a choice in whatever they decide to do with their lives.*

Inspired by my role as a long-time adjunct, I decided to pursue my PhD. In support of my journey of the PhD process, I joined several online communities of women in similar stages in life who balance life and academia. During March of 2020, I was in my final semester of coursework and set to take qualifying exams that fall semester. Despite being so close to completing my degree, I was actively contemplating leaving my program due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic. I was terrified for the safety of my children and that of my spouse, who was in charge of all things COVID-related in his role as Associate VP of Public Safety at his university. I had no idea how, or if, I could make things work. During one of my scrolling days, I saw a call from Kristina asking who might be interested in collaborating on a project related to "gender and COVID." I have taught an Introduction to Women and Gender Studies class every semester since 2013, and am constantly on the lookout for current and relevant materials to add to my courses. I recall an instant excitement about the prospect of this project but was hesitant to put my name in the hat because of my inexperience in collaborative research and writing. I felt a deep level of imposter syndrome as a first-generation college student from the middle of nowhere Appalachia. I had no idea what to expect but decided to respond anyway.

The level of intimidation that I felt when we had our first meeting via *Zoom and saw how many accomplished researchers were present was palpable. Women from many parts of the world joined to talk about gender and brainstorm ideas for a research project. I am a student who typically detests group work because I end up doing it all but did not get the feeling it would be that way in this group. Instead, within this group of women, including some who were mothers, I found a bit of myself as a researcher. Participating in our research meetings gave me something to look forward to as I was able to connect with others outside of my home where my family and I were quarantined. As time progressed, group members also served as a community for me that became a sort of life raft in the chaos of COVID. While I had no prior experience conducting virtual research, I found the transition to be an easy one. I have worked remotely, alone, and at home, since 2013. I have also used social media and online communities as my gateway into staying connected with other professionals since before COVID, so the jump into this realm* via *Zoom and other platforms was a somewhat seamless way to be able to move forward in my professional journey.*

Despite the notable variability in our professional experiences and some shared trepidation regarding our potential for success, the desire each of us had to connect with others and remain professionally active during the pandemic ultimately trumped our initial hesitations regarding collaboration. We recognized that each of us maintained unique personal experiences, professional expertise, and research and publication histories that might complement one another, suggesting there was room for each of us to contribute and grow by participating in this collaborative research endeavor.

Pandemic Impact on Our Virtual Lives

In March 2020, we each experienced our universities abruptly shifting all aspects of our academic work to the virtual environment. Olga worked on her dissertation from home in the pursuit of her PhD. *Completing my [OV] PhD from home due to COVID has taught me to do my work independently without the need of scheduled and regular meetings. [Engaging in this research partnership] seemed more like an extension of what I have been doing rather than the brand-new experience … maybe except for some meetings we held here and there.* Similarly, Dee Dee's graduate classes were also delivered online in response to COVID-19. While her teaching modality did not change, having already been actively teaching remotely, students' needs were altered considerably due to frequent interruptions in learning as a consequence of COVID-19 status and altered states of living and learning. Additionally, connections to those who knew and understood her situation as a doctoral student embedded within the pandemic were lost. *I [DK] felt like working within this group kept me connected to the part of me that needed to use my brain in a way that keeps me moving forward. Being older than most people in my stage of graduate school, my experiences are different and sometimes I don't fit into the in-person graduate student lifestyle with those who have the freedom to stay up all night and study or go out on the weekends to burn off some stress.* Connecting with other academic women via COVID GAP bridged Dee Dee's heightened need for connection with her competencies as an academic who was already proficient in a virtual environment, thus facilitating her ability to engage with the group and refine her abilities as a researcher. In their roles as faculty members and administrators, both Kristina and Sara designed and delivered their courses online and directed academic programs in a virtual environment. This represented a total shift in the working environment for Kristina while Sara's position was virtually based prior to the pandemic.

In addition to adjusting our activities within academia, we all noted that we also experienced motherhood in a qualitatively different manner than we had prior to the pandemic. Dee Dee and Sara gained experience guiding their own children's education endeavors following the shutdown of most schools across the country due to the ongoing spread of the COVID-19 virus. These circumstances impacted how they navigated their day-to-day responsibilities, including their professional endeavors. While Olga's children were not yet enrolled in formal education due to their young ages, she had to attend to their needs with little external support and without breaks. Kristina's older daughter had graduated from college but was now working in quarantine and living in isolation in another state while her son's senior year of college was cut short by the pandemic requiring him to move home. These new circumstances demanded that Kristina provide her young adult children with increased cognitive and emotional support as they navigated their own understanding and responses to the pandemic. While our individual circumstances varied, we each found ourselves caring for our children in ways we had not anticipated at the onset of COVID-19.

Balancing the often-competing demands of attending to our children's needs while simultaneously meeting our professional responsibilities was challenging, yet virtual connection enabled our success, especially in our pursuit of our collective research. Sara explained: *One of my primary research areas is leveraging online platforms to bridge ongoing inequities and gaps in mental health counseling, clinical supervision, and education. I know that online collaborations work and was excited to extend my skills and knowledge in a novel way. Like Olga, this particular pursuit seemed like a natural extension of my previous work.* Our shared identities as academic women and mothers combined with our common intellectual curiosities, professional experiences, and comfort with navigating the online medium suggested that we had the capacity to effectively collaborate in our pursuit of research in a virtual environment. Yet, each of us found ourselves curious to know how this might look.

VIRTUAL COLLABORATION

Given our differences in academic identity and experiences, coupled with the knowledge that online mediums only facilitate narrow insight into each other's lives (Zhao et al., 2008), it was unclear how we might work together, especially since we did not know each other prior to pursuing our partnership. While we could view each other's online presences, it is common for people to engage in impression management in virtual environments (Zhao et al.), resulting in a curated glimpse into their lives. This phenomenon effectively allows others access to an individual's personal and/or professional highlights, which often emphasize strengths and accomplishments rather than revealing potential deficiencies. As a consequence of this restricted presentation, it is easy to overlook a person's unique qualities via their social media profiles. This, in turn, may potentially dilute a person's understanding of others' personhoods, lead to biases, result in unreasonable expectations, and/or fuel dysfunctional interactions. Given this phenomenon of online impression management, each of us effectively agreed to participate in our collaboration based on the limited (and potentially skewed) knowledge afforded to us by other group members' virtual presences. As we entered our research partnership, we were keenly aware that our intentional engagement with each other would be essential to our success. In retrospect, we are able to see that our group's dynamics aligned well with Tuckman's (1965) Stages of Group Development (forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning).

Stage 1, the Forming Stage, consists of group initiation. Within this process, it is common for group members to express shyness, anxiety, and uncertainty (Tuckman, 1965). Everyone is generally on their best behavior and wants to be accepted by other members of the group (Tuckman, 1965). Characteristic of this phase, members of our subgroup started to form impressions of one another, to gain an understanding of how the group would function together, and to learn what we might do together almost immediately. Given our choice to meet in a synchronous virtual environment via teleconferencing software (Zoom), we automatically had visual access to each other's personal environments, a privilege not typical in most in-person professional endeavors. Although online meetings are not particularly uncommon in professional environments, our ability to control the formality of our teleconferences was compromised amidst COVID-19 as we were each quarantined in our homes that were occupied by other members of our families and their belongings.

We did not have the luxury of presenting ourselves in professionally decorated and calm office environments absent of background noises and other distractions. For example, Kristina shared: *My son had to move home in his senior year of college. My husband and I had moved and down-sized as empty nesters so I lost my separate office space to his bedroom. My commute now consisted of three feet between my bed and desk! Additionally, my husband was gone for nine weeks taking care of his own mother and her health.*

Due to circumstances such as these, we quickly (and somewhat surprisingly) discovered that our pursuit of a virtual collaboration meant that we did not need to share a geographic context with one another to become deeply embedded in each other's professional and personal lives, despite the novelty of our work together.

During our first virtual meeting, we spent time building rapport and getting to know one another before pursuing any official research work. We learned about each person's motivations for joining COVID GAP and considered how they differed and overlapped. Further, we introduced ourselves through our identities as partners and parents in support of our interest in our subgroup. We also made space to explicitly name our professional strengths and weaknesses, discussing how we might balance each other out and challenge each other to grow throughout our collaboration. Consistent with stage 1, we actively formed our relationship(s). We made a commitment to show up and try our best throughout the project(s). We also took this opportunity to learn about each other's social positionality and personal responsibilities.

Stage 2, the Storming Stage, includes vying for positions and roles within the group (Tuckman, 1965). This phase sometimes leads to conflict as leaders are identified and negotiate control. In reflection, we found this dynamic to be essentially non-existent within our group, especially as a negative experience. We each deferred to Kristina, recognizing her motivation, academic rank, administrative position, record of scholarship, and designation as the founding member of COVID GAP. She also served as the Principal Investigator on the group's Internal Review Board application at her university. Despite her role as the group's de facto leader, Kristina was very clear that being the organizer did not automatically make her responsible for the group's progress nor designate her as first author on any of our potential publications, clarifying instead that this is an earned position. *I (KSB) knew that taking on the role of leader was leaning into my strengths, but I also knew from previous experience that progress would not be made if this was dependent on me alone.*

During Stage 3, the Norming Stage, group identity starts to form, acceptable behaviors and contributions are identified and normalized within the group, and implicit and explicit group norms emerge (Tuckman, 1965). This stage is often marked by cooperation and cohesion and frequently occurs in tandem with the storming stage (Tuckman, 1965), which was true for our subgroup. While we all recognized Kristina as our natural leader, she placed boundaries around this role to prevent the possibility of overburdening herself as informed by her past experiences of engaging in collaborative research. This led to establishing the group norm that order of authorship on each of the subgroup's various projects would be based on contribution rather than dependent on rank, organizational role, or any other factor. Because we previously took the opportunity to proactively get to know each other and establish a strong rapport, we were each comfortable with this norm and trusted one another to adhere to our agreement.

We used shared folders via OneDrive to organize our data, to coordinate our review of the published scholarship related to our research topics, and to write together. This tool allowed us to easily share resources with one another, to access and analyze our data collaboratively despite our physical separation, and to contribute to the development of writing simultaneously and in real time. It also made it easy to keep track of our individual contributions within our work to determine authorship, as we each used a different color font in our shared documents. The editing features within OneDrive also allowed us the ability to ask each other questions and provide one another with feedback directly within our drafts using track changes and via the insertion of comments. This effectively streamlined our work by keeping a majority of our communications on one platform, allowing each of us the access to each other's work in real-time, and to remain actively engaged in a dynamic writing process.

Another norm that we adopted as a group was to always check-in with each other on a personal level when meeting prior to addressing research tasks. We have reflected on our prioritization of rapport and interpersonal dynamics during meetings and determined that this norm is embedded in our socialized gendered behaviors and cultural expectations of pursuing social pleasantries before business. Further, our collaboration would often move to group texts for more immediate response and support, especially in times when each of us faced acute struggles in our personal or professional lives that we shared and disclosed with each other or when deadlines on projects were nearing. Also, the fact that two members of the group (KSB and SB) are licensed mental health professionals likely led to establishing the norm of and prioritizing healthy communication, which, we believe, positively influenced our resulting successful collaboration.

As previously mentioned, we met via a synchronous video teleconferencing platform, which led to an increased sense of connection and intimacy as we gained visual entry to each other's lives. By enabling our cameras, we allowed each other access into our personal environments and provided one another the opportunity to view our non-verbal communications. Observing each other's environments and physical cues allowed us to learn more about each other's personal lives, including information we may not have shared with one another if working in an office environment or solely by email. This professional anomaly likely enhanced our group's rapport. By viewing each other's intimate environments, we were able to see when a member was distracted and/or needed to attend to a conflicting stimulus (e.g., a fellow faculty member is calling regarding a student or a kid really needs to show a "stuffy," etc.). Interruptions were normalized to some degree, too. We also started commenting on things in each other's environment—"Hey! Looks like your cat needs some extra love today!" "Oh, look! Prom decorations!" or "Wait! Is that a child running by?" By removing the barrier between work and home, we essentially gained unprecedented access to each other's personal spaces and lives, which (for us) increased our sense of connection. Additionally, we became "friends" on social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, providing additional access to each other's personal lives and making us privy to information likely unavailable to us offline. We would often remember and follow up on things we observed via these mediums in subsequent meetings and as we checked in over text message, further increasing our investment in each other's lives and contributing to our affective bond with one another.

This increased stake in each other's lives helped strengthen our rapport and enhanced our trust in one another and as a group. Heightened trust, in turn, precipitated our increased vulnerability with one another wherein we established an ongoing group norm to always explicitly state our fears, challenges, and needs—as they apply to our personal lives, professional work, and/or the research process itself. We also felt less need to perform for one another under the guise of professionalism. Dee Dee captured this dynamic well. *I (DK) was originally very self-conscious about the state of my space … and feeling like I had to have things completed perfectly before we met. After a few meetings, … the lack of judgment … I started thinking about it. I can collaborate with wet hair, with party stuff in the background,* etc. We were able to focus on each other and our work rather than extraneous, more superficial details that might otherwise serve as distractions outside of subgroup's unique mores. As our connection grew, we also established the practice of sharing positive experiences, too, which eventually led to camaraderie independent of the research process. Our relationships organically evolved to the point where we now regularly provide holistic support for one another on an ongoing basis, alternating between cheerleading each other on in life events (e.g., dissertation progress and promotion), and holding space for each other in the face of life's challenges (e.g., illness and tragedy). Our virtual collaboration allowed us to build our own small community, despite geography. We became invested in one another, not only as professionals but as individual women as well.

In Tuckman's (1965) Stage 4, the Performing Stage, work and progress commenced on the basis of a relatively stable group structure. Over time, we experienced ebbs and flows in our work, most frequently related to responsibilities related to motherhood. Children were always home and had novel needs that did not exist pre-pandemic. For example, Kristina's college-age son unexpectedly moved home from across the country when his campus closed while Olga, Dee Dee, and Sara navigated the demands of homeschooling and virtual learning for their children in preschool, elementary, middle, and high school. Our shared identity as academic mothers seemed to provide an implicit understanding of the often-conflicting roles and responsibilities that emerge when simultaneously attending to children's needs and meeting professional obligations. There was an explicit acknowledgment of challenges inherent to serving as an academic mother, especially while navigating the pandemic. The norms we established in the initial stages of our collaboration, including checking-in with one other, being explicit in our needs and challenges, as well as our commitment to respecting each other as academic women and mothers, and our willingness to provide grace to one another, facilitated our ability to effectively function as co-researchers. We found ourselves in overall balance as a whole. When one of us was navigating a particular challenge, another one of us would step up to maintain our group's momentum, trusting that such actions would be reciprocated as we all collectively and independently navigated the ongoing incongruous demands of navigating the pandemic within the confines of our roles as academic women.

This process was most recently exemplified when Dee Dee experienced a personal tragedy that left her unable to contribute to the shared work in a timely manner. Sara reached out directly by telephone to check in and make sure that Dee Dee was okay. While checking on Dee Dee's emotional state, Sara also noted a pending deadline. Sara explicitly asked Dee Dee to let the group know what she needed. Dee Dee shared: *I (DK) struggle with the thought of letting people down, but even more so with this group of women. We've worked so hard throughout this pandemic that the thought of being the reason we missed a deadline didn't sit well with me.*

While she was gentle, Sara gave me the proverbial kick in the butt that I needed to get myself back on track and finish my part of the work so that the group could continue being successful. I found out later that the group was developing plans to pick up my slack as a way of protecting and supporting me, but they would have had every right to kick me out, frankly.

As we continued our work together, our research interests and strengths emerged more clearly within our group. Our previous experiences were variable and we were each a bit initially tentative regarding how to engage in our collaboration, unsure how exactly to contribute. Recognizing the value of structure in forging the path of success in her own scholarly identity, Kristina kept our group on task by keeping us organized and establishing deadlines. This framework provided each of us with areas on which to focus our scholarly efforts while simultaneously serving as a source of motivation, accountability, and support. Consequently, we developed an excellent rhythm in our work. For example, Sara and Kristina wrote like two puzzle pieces complimenting each other in both timing (e.g., K tended to write late at night while S wrote during the day) and style. Olga and Dee Dee had strengths in their skills such as interpreting and synthesizing previous empirical data as well as locating important references and attending to formatting.

It felt as if we had almost begun to successfully co-parent. Our life experiences as parents and our professional skills coalesced. We trusted each other. We wrote over each other (with track changes and comments and suggestions) and encouraged in places of writer's block or "stuckness." We also challenged and questioned each other from the perspective of pushing our collaboration toward success. Olga shares that *trusting one another was quite easy as we got along immediately. I think in other, very random, fully online collaborations (since we never met in person), I could be worried about the legitimacy of such partnerships, but … We trusted one another, and we definitely trusted the process of working together.*

Our group has yet to enter the final stage of Tuckman's (1965) model, Adjourning, and has no intention of doing so in the near future. Given the bonds we've created and the personal and professional benefits we've each gained from our collaboration, we hope to continue our work as a group for some time. In fact, as the findings from initial studies were specific to academic womxn, COVID GAP expanded recruitment globally across academic identities to include all faculty and graduate students in a second phase of research. Phase 2 data was collected in spring 2021, and its analysis is still underway. Our subgroup plans to leverage this second phase of data to expand our original exploration of partnered academics and academic parents to examine the impact of other demographic variables (e.g., male-identified versus female-identified and partners with and without children). We also intend to revisit our analyses of relational dynamics and parenthood in th of relational dynamics and parenthood in the context of these expanded recruitment efforts while also recognizing the ways our own academic identities have shifted in the three years since we first began our collaboration. Due to our ongoing success in working with one another, our subgroup has also discussed the possibility of pursuing research regarding topics of common interest independent of our work within COVID GAP.

Conclusion

In line with best practices in qualitative investigations, we have engaged in ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process (Wilkinson, 2015). In doing so, we identified that many of our own experiences mirrored our participants' accounts of navigating the pandemic as academic women, especially in the roles of partners and mothers. Parallel to many of our participants, we each have struggled to balance the often-competing needs of attending to our families navigating crises while also attempting to meet our professional responsibilities. Discussion of "overwhelm", "exhaustion," and being "stretched too thin" was prevalent in the data and in line with our own experiences. Due to mandatory quarantines and similar circumstances, many of our participants expressed feeling lonely, worried, and fearful about the future. They described a deep desire to benefit from the support of others to help address day-to-day tasks as well as a yearning to connect with those outside of the home. These experiences echoed our own, which, as mentioned previously, led each of us to pursue our current virtual collaboration. In retrospect, we are able to easily identify that our group's virtual collaboration aided each of us in overcoming the negative emotions we shared in common with our participants by providing us a sense of community, purpose, and hope for the future. We also recognized that our subgroup's collective success in meeting each of our individual needs in this realm was the result of our intentional efforts to show up for each other in an authentic manner as well as due to our deliberate cultivation of our group's culture. Further, it is worth highlighting that the level of intimacy we gained as virtual collaborators across four time zones would not likely have been possible without the use of the available technology.

Virtual collaboration has allowed each of us to contribute to our collective work in a way that is meaningful and honors our individual strengths. Due to our shared identity as academic women, coupled with our ability to connect with each other online despite our different locales, variable time zones, and personal and professional responsibilities, each of us is able to find significance in our research endeavors without having to compromise other elements of our lives. In addition to removing the barrier of variable geography, virtual connection has empowered us to circumvent other daily challenges that often impact academic women's ability to engage in traditional face-to-face collaborations, (e.g., coordinating schedules, navigating commutes, negotiating release from domestic tasks, etc.), allowing us to focus our collective energy on completing our work and contribute to the scholarly literature. More succinctly, virtual connection has allowed each of us the opportunity to work from a place of integrity where we are not forced to compromise one aspect of our identities (i.e., our priorities and responsibilities as mothers) for another (i.e., our priorities and responsibilities as academics).

Our group's experiences confirm that working in concert with other academics in an online environment can lead to meaningful professional experiences that result in productive scholarly output. Given that publications serve as an academic currency of sorts that is needed for tenure, promotion, and other professional advancements (Grapin et al., 2013; Pendlebury, 2009), and that the division of labor both in homes (Yavorsky et al., 2015) as well as across many academic departments (Misra et al., 2011) is often inequitable across genders, it may be prudent for academic women to actively consider the pursuit of such partnerships as one step in facilitating their professional advancement on an ongoing basis and outside of the context of the ongoing pandemic. Not only might such arrangements serve to be convenient and productive, but they may also serve to expand professional networks, increase knowledge and skills via interdisciplinary partnerships, enhance professional experiences, and heighten experienced levels of self-efficacy.

Our subgroup's experiences are supported by separate analyses of work across COVID GAP's projects that suggest that members' socialization as women and the expectations that accompany this status (be polite, avoid conflict, don't hurt others' feelings, etc.) impacted the dynamics of our research cooperative and influenced the manner in which we each approached our research (Brown et al., 2022a, 2022b). While we have not had the opportunity to empirically confirm the same, we suspect these findings extend beyond the virtual environment into face-to-face partnerships as well. Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of initiating and engaging in authentic relationships that prioritize open and transparent communication when pursuing professional partnerships within academia. This is likely even more prudent within virtual collaborations.

Moreover, within environments where glass ceilings may often inspire women to keep their voices tempered as to not risk echoing where our words may be perceived as too loud or as causing a commotion, we encourage the pursuit of overt conversations regarding group expectations, norms, attribution, and similar matters. This may be beneficial in ensuring meaningful and productive research collaboratives, which, in turn, have the potential to greatly influence the trajectory of our individual careers and respective fields. Finally, in line with Brown et al. (2022a), we recognize the potential for women academics to disrupt historical norms within the academy by actively leaning into our complex identities as academic women and mothers rather than repressing elements of our intersectionality in an effort to fit outdated professional mores. By removing the stress of trying to conceal elements of our reality and instead showing up authentically in our work in tandem with actively supporting each other's professional growth and success via collaboration, women academics are well-positioned to continue producing meaningful work and offering valuable contributions to our respective fields.

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