

Change of Mother's Experience in Digital Media

Shiyao Wu^{1,*}

¹ *Digital Media and Society, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, The United Kingdom*

* *Corresponding author. Email: 446781709@qq.com*

ABSTRACT

Digital media is a good way for more people to express their opinions. This article uses the literature research method to explore how mothers and feminist mothers use digital media to empower themselves. It is found that the development of digital media allows feminist voices to be raised so that mothers can gain more rights to speak. It also helps mothers fight for gender equality in childcare. However, social media is presented in different ways in different online environments. The result shows that the argument and digital media increase the class difference between mothers and blurs the power of mothers. Therefore, the integration of maternal rights and feminism is progressive but limited.

Keywords: *Digital media, Feminist, Pregnancy, Parenting.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The experiences of motherhood are changing with the introduction of digital media. For decades, the word "mother" has always been accompanied by some negative words. [26] Some feminist studies argue that motherhood runs counter to the idea of feminism. [2] Accordingly, these studies tend to avoid mentioning "mothers"[22] or discussing motherhood.[33] They attribute conflicts between motherhood and feminism to mothers' low social status in the long history: when women are pregnant or are responsible for raising children, many of them are confined in households, experiencing physical discomforts and devoting themselves to the needs of children.[29] However, the popularization of internet information provides a good opportunity to empower women when they experience motherhood.[23] Specifically, mothers can freely express their discontent with "mom stereotypes" on the internet and make motherhood-related topics visible to the public. This article aims to explore the role of digital media in breaking the antagonism between feminism and motherhood. It first discusses how digital media empower mothers to promote the integration of motherhood and feminism. Then it argues that the empowerment of mothers by digital media is still hindered by social contexts, especially consumerism. This article reflects that the integration of maternal rights and feminism is progressive but limited.

2. THE FEMINISM MOTHER'S PARENTING STYLE

Feminist mothers take care of their children, but they will not sacrifice themselves for their children according to traditional parenting norms. [18] And although many mothers are unable to remove their responsibility in the real world, they, utilizing online freedom of expression, create the image of resistant mothers on digital media platforms. For example, many websites are no longer limited to delivering parenting knowledge, but have multiple purposes, including entertainment, shops and debates. Accordingly, mothers do not need to devote all their time to the housework of the family. Emphasizing that they have other things apart from childcare, these mothers challenge intensive mothering. Resistant mothers construct images differently from traditional mothers to expand possibilities of motherhood.[23] With the continuous challenge of motherhood discourse, the demands of motherhood and feminism gradually converge, which is in line with the feminists' struggle against oppression. As O'Reilly[27] argues, "while we may not yet know completely what empowered [or feminist] mothering looks like, we, in interrupting and deconstructing the patriarchal narrative of motherhood, destabilize the hold this discourse has on the meaning and practice of mothering, and clear a space for the articulation of counter-narratives of mothering." Moreover,

resistant mothers in the virtual world refer to women oppose docility.[12] Bordo [4] believes that women have always been portrayed as docile figures. When women try to become disobedient mothers, they often use offensive language instead of kind and gentle language.[13] For instance, when expressing their dissatisfaction with male power, they may use the crude words that men are accustomed to using in traditional gender stereotypes, in order to insult or even to provoke men. In this way, resistance mothers not only blur the binary opposition between men and women but also confront gentleness that mothers should possess.

Whereas feminists emphasize women's control of their body,[9] mothers lose such control under the patriarchal system. Specifically, many mothers are considered pornographic and unseemly in their parenting practices, including breastfeeding, and they even have no reproductive rights. With the development of healthcare apps, women can track their pregnancy and parenting situations anytime and anywhere, and acquire more knowledge to understand the changes in their bodies during pregnancy and parenting.[14] The use of technology challenges the traditional idea that women's bodies are uncontrollable and permeable; instead, women can freely choose and collect the information they need on digital media platforms to regain control over their bodies.[15] As Frizzo-Barker and Chow-White point out,[10] users can maintain contact with their bodies through digital media at any time, thus exercising the right to their gender. Mothers' control over their bodies can also be symbolic. For example, mothers will resist the gender tradition on social media by uploading photos of breastfeeding to Instagram, so that the feeding behavior of mothers can be publicized in public places.[3] This presents a picture that the mother is giving in to the child, and the result is that the mother no longer has to do a great thing on the sly. This means that the mother's body can be controlled by herself, not just by the husband, and that the mother's actions are no longer restricted to the husband. In fact, such control over the body is subverting the norms of patriarchy and strengthening the majesty of the mother. [1]

In the past, mothers' experiences about pregnancy and child-rearing were not valued because they did not count as public concerns.[11] As stated by Travers,[31] mothers' child-rearing work was classified as "private", leading to exclusion from the public domain. Digital media break down the boundary between the private and

public spaces so that the role of mothers is not confined to the private sphere. More and more mothers have different voices on relatively public blogs, which to some extent helps women transfer the stereotyped "private" parenting experience to public areas.[15] Stavrositu and Sundar[30] also prove that a blog is a good place to provide women's rights and strengthen the initiative of mothers, because mothers can share their personal stories with the public as well as convey a different interpretation of their roles.[20] This means that mothers have some potential to change the mainstream public consciousness by moving topics about motherhood into public spheres.[31] For instance, when mothers disclose some information about the parenting behavior that only belongs to the mothers in the gender stereotype on the blog, they indicate that men also need to shoulder the responsibility of parenting in order to achieve the goal of gender equality in parenting. In this way, they promote equal parenting to the public. In addition, women can oppose hegemonism in virtual space in a bottom-up way.[17] As women can remain anonymous on public social media platforms, they are free to choose whether to accept the advice of health care professionals or traditional ways of mothering, without worrying that their opinions are different from these methods of raising children.[23] This is a good way to improve mothers' rights, since digital media make it easier for them to acquire parenting knowledge from not only medical institutions but also other mothers and their own experience. [16]

3. THE DISADVANTAGE OF DIGITAL MEDIA FOR MOTHER

While digital media play a role in mitigating the dichotomy between motherhood and feminism, this essay hesitates to celebrate feminist mothers as women's liberation or empowerment. Not all mothers have access to the rights afforded by social media. Mothers' resistance to gender inequality in parenting has become a privilege, intensifying the rivalry between mothers of different social backgrounds. Specifically, the education level and socio-economic status have an influence on women's opinions about motherhood, and hence they communicate very differently in virtual space to find support. When better-off mothers are sharing baby formula, for example, some poorer women may think they are flaunting wealth. This is because the digital divide in digital media has yet to be addressed, and it is a problem that directly divides women. Also, the difference in

communication among mothers of different social backgrounds makes some mothers prefer to discussing parenting knowledge with their husbands from the same social class.[8] In this way, through digital media, mothers constantly internalize the norms of patriarchy and copy men's discrimination against women.[5]

What's more, digital media's help on mothers' control of the body is likely to transform their body into objects of consumption. Digital media are commercialized. It sends for-profit establishing parenting in traditional gender stereotypes that are copied to the virtual space.[6] And empowering mothers as consumers reinforce gender norms. According to Thomas and Lupton,[21] pregnancy apps will tell pregnant women how they are expected to behave and what they are expected to consume, and these shopping lists recreate gender stereotypes in parenting. For example, when the icon of Mindfulness for Pregnancy that sells exercise courses to pregnant women[24] depicts the body of a pregnant woman, other parts of the body are thin except for the pregnant woman's belly. This means that the design of the icon of the app conforms to the traditional aesthetic or the so-called male gaze — ideally slim female body.[25] Furthermore, the app's antenatal exercise guide also advertises that pregnant women can be slim in different ways,[7] thereby linking motherhood with being slim. As a result, the ultimate image of the mother is still designed to cater to the aesthetic tastes of men, and the definition of the mother's health is blurred, that is, thin is healthy. In fact, a slim figure is just the male version of female beauty.

In addition, women's disclosure of their discomforts or anxiety of motherhood in the public sphere implies that they still largely shoulder the pressure of pregnancy and parenting. Not only many husbands are absent in parenting, but social institutions also do not support mothers' childcare. In other words, social institutions that should be responsible for some child-rearing functions have failed. Under the background of neoliberalism, people take more responsibilities than before, including security and economic issues.[20] And digital media provide resources for self-support. For example, Wilson and Yochim[34] examine how mothers cope with social instability, finding that online resources and communities like Facebook and Pinterest are the main ways for mothers to obtain material and emotional support. Mothers believe that the responsibilities of the family, including financial, security, and parenting aspects, are often under their shoulders. Therefore, in the

process of raising a child, the mother takes for granted the financial and emotional contribution to the child, and digital media can help the mother to cope with these responsibilities to some extent. Another example of mothers' self-support under neoliberalism is pregnancy support groups on Facebook during COVID-19. Pregnant women shared stories, experiences and advice on how to safely conduct prenatal checks while hospitals dealt with COVID-19 patients and how to exercise at home during the lockdown. Their struggles for safety during the pandemic suggest that governments did not provide appropriate guidance. As some users mentioned, governments' advice on whether pregnant women were at greater risks of COVID-19 was ambiguous, and hospitals did not offer clear instructions on how to continue prenatal care during the lockdown. Self-responsible does not fundamentally give women rights. Instead, it still assumes that mothers can sacrifice everything for children and households.[15] Therefore, if a mother cannot sort out household issues, she will feel guilty and hence blame herself.[28] This is consistent with the view of Pitts[28] that although mothers can improve their discourse rights through virtual technology, they do not necessarily obtain women's personal rights.[28]

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, for a long time, under the oppression of patriarchal society, the subordinate role of mothers is the main reason for the difficulty in incorporating maternal rights in feminism. However, with the permeation of digital media into people's lives, more and more voices of feminism have been raised, and mothers have gained more rights to speak, which increases the opportunities for mothers to fight for gender equality in parenting, and even plays a role in promoting feminism. However, social media are influenced by changes in various branches of society. Digital media do not mitigate class differences among mothers, making mothers' empowerment as their privileges in specific social-economic backgrounds. Moreover, many online platforms are for-profits, supporting women by encouraging them to purchase goods. Also, in the context of neoliberalism, digital media reflect a massive disruption of public child care and social support. Therefore, digital media make mothers' empowerment ambiguous.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Shiyao Wu.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bartlett, A., (2002). Breastfeeding as headwork: Corporeal feminism and meanings for breastfeeding. *Women's Studies International Forum*. 25(3), 373–382.
- [2] Beyer, C., (2019) Motherhood and 21st Century Feminism: Reaching out across the Divide. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics (Double Issue: Feminism and Motherhood in the 21st Century)*. 3(1-2). 1-6.
- [3] Boon, S. and Pentney, B., (2015). Selfies virtual lactivism: Breastfeeding selfies and the performance of motherhood. *International Journal of Communication*. 9(1), 14.
- [4] Bordo, S., (1993). Feminism, Foucault and the politics of the body. Up against Foucault: Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism. 176-179.
- [5] Chen, G.M., (2013). Don't call me that: A techno-feminist critique of the term mommy blogger. *Mass Communication and Society*. 16(4), 510-532.
- [6] Calcutt, A., (1998). *White noise: An AZ of the contradictions of cyberculture*. Springer.
- [7] Guzmán, I. M., and Valdivia, A. N., (2004). Brain, brow, and booty: Latina iconicity in U.S. popular culture. *The Communication Review*. 7(2), 205-221.
- [8] Doshi, M.J., (2018). Barbies, Goddesses, and Entrepreneurs: Discourses of Gendered Digital Embodiment in Women's Health Apps. *Women's Studies in Communication*. 41(2), 183-203.
- [9] Dionne, M., Davis, C., Fox, J. and Gurevich, M., (1995). Feminist ideology as a predictor of body dissatisfaction in women. *Sex Roles*. 33(3-4), 277-287.
- [10] Frizzo-Barker, J. and Chow-White, P.A., (2012). "There's an App for That" Mediating mobile moms and connected careerists through smartphones and networked individualism. *Feminist Media Studies*. 12(4), 580-589.
- [11] Gatens, M., (1996). *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*. New York: Routledge.
- [12] Goulding, A. and Spacey, R., (2003). Women and the Information Society: barriers and participation. *Fila journal*. 29(1), 33-40.
- [13] Herring, S. C., (1996). *Computer-mediated communication: Linguistic, social, and cross-cultural perspectives (Vol. 39)*. John Benjamins Publishing.
- [14] Hochschild, A.R., (2012). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Univ of California Press.
- [15] Johnson, S.A., (2014). "Maternal devices", social media and the self-management of pregnancy, mothering and child health. *Societies*. 4(2), 330-350.
- [16] Johnson, S.A., (2015). 'Intimate mothering publics': comparing face-to-face support groups and Internet use for women seeking information and advice in the transition to first-time motherhood. *Culture, health & sexuality*, 17(2), 237-251
- [17] Kellner, D., (1997). Intellectuals, the new public spheres, and techno-politics. *New Political Science*. 169-188.
- [18] Liss, A., (2004). Maternal Rites: Feminist Strategies. *N. paradoxa*. 14(2), 24-31.
- [19] Lopez, L.K., (2009). The radical act of 'mommy blogging': redefining motherhood through the blogosphere. *New media & society*. 11(5), 729-747.
- [20] Lupton, D. ed., (1999). *Risk and sociocultural theory: New directions and perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.
- [21] Thomas, G. M., and D. Lupton., (2015). 'Threats and Thrills: Pregnancy Apps, Risk and Consumption.' *Health, Risk & Society*. 17(7–8), 495–509.
- [22] Mack, A.N., (2018). Critical approaches to motherhood. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.
- [23] Madge, C., and H. O'Connor., (2006). "Parenting Gone Wired: Empowerment of

- New Mothers on the Internet?" *Social & Cultural Geography*. 7(2), 199 - 220.
- [24] MindApps. (2013). *Mindfulness for Pregnancy* (Version 1.2) [Mobile application software].
- [25] O'Brien, H. D. L., (2011). She gives birth, she's wearing a bikini: Mobilizing the postpreg-nant celebrity mom body to manage the post-second wave crisis in femininity. *Women's Studies in Communication*. 34(2), 111-138.
- [26] O'Reilly, A., (2016). *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*. Toronto: Demeter Press. Kindle edition.
- [27] O'Connor, H. and Madge, C., (2004). 'My mum's thirty years out of date'. *Community, Work & Family*. 7(3), 351-369.
- [28] Pitts, V., (2004). Illness and Internet empowerment: writing and reading breast cancer in cyberspace. *Health*. 8(1), 33-59.
- [29] Reiger, K., (1999), November. 'Sort of part of the women's movement. but different': Mothers' organisations and australian feminism. In *Women's studies international forum* .6(1), 585-595.
- [30] Stavrositu, C. and Sundar, S. S., (2008), May. Psychological empowerment derived from blogging: Is it agency or is it community. In *Artículo presentado en la annual meeting of the International Communication Association*.
- [31] Travers, A., (2003). Parallel subaltern feminist counter publics in cyberspace. *Sociological Perspectives*.46(2),223-237.
- [32] Valentine, G., (1997). 'My Son's a Bit Dizzy. "My Wife's a Bit Soft': Gender, children and cultures of parenting. *Gender, Place and Culture: A journal of feminist geography*. 4(1), 37-62.
- [33] Westervelt, A., (2018). Is motherhood the unfinished work of feminism. *The Guardian*, 26.
- [34] Wilson, J.A. and Yochim, E.C., (2015). Mothering through precarity: Becoming mamapreneurial. *Cultural Studies*. 29(5-6), 669-686.