

MOTHERS ON TWITTER (X): EXCHANGING SUPPORT AND NARRATING MOTHERHOOD

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Abstract

As almost all aspects of our lives, motherhood in the 21st century also is influenced and transformed by new media. Parents, especially mothers, use the *Facebook*, *Instagram* and even *Twitter (X)* as digital diaries, as stages for performing an ideal mother's role, or even "safe spaces" to gain support and the feeling of empowerment. Recent research of motherhood discourses and mothering practices in social media has mainly focused on the evidence of mediation and mediatization. However, limited attention has been brought to examining *Twitter* in context of mothering. Therefore, this paper focuses on the narratives of a particular cluster of Latvian-speaking mothers on *Twitter* who use *Twitter* as a platform for exchanging informational, emotional and physical support, forming a "portable" community. The case study consists of a narrative analysis of 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews with mothers and a thematic analysis of 1111 tweets, gathered from 9 other public *Twitter* accounts (covering a period of 2 weeks), that have been identified by interviewees as part of this particular *Twitter*-bubble. The paper provides an insight into the narratives of women, voicing their motherhood struggles and victories in the "safe space" of *Twitter*'s "bubble" of new Latvian mothers, illuminating also a unique and unlikely use for an asymmetric and decentralized social media platform.

Keywords: *motherhood, mediatization, Twitter, X, portable community.*

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Introduction

Although modern technology may assist with daily chores and eases the physical toll of mothering, contemporary motherhood still comes with a set of challenges new mothers face, needing all forms of support – even remote via social media. Motivation for using *Facebook*, *Instagram* and various other platforms among new parents has been examined in many studies. According to Eurostat, in 2021 an average of 95% young people (ages 16–29) and 80% of adults use Internet regularly [Eurostat 2021]. Some mothers are eager to normalise their experience [Locatelli 2017], others feel the need to actualise and empower themselves [Lee & Chen 2018], to strengthen their identity [Archer & Kao 2018; Yam 2019; Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2017], and to create their own narrative or even autobiography [Zappavigna & Zhao 2017; Micalizzi 2020; Locatelli 2017]. While to some mothers the opportunity to present themselves, “perform motherhood” [Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2017] is important, there is a distinguished part of mothers who seek social support [Archer & Kao 2018; Locatelli 2017], a “safe space” [Archer & Kao 2018], and a digital community [Mourkarzel et al. 2021].

Researchers have mainly focused their gaze on *Facebook* and *Instagram*, and there is a significant gap in exploring, how parents use the social media platform *Twitter* (www.Twitter.com). Although on 23 July 2023, Elon Musk, owner and CTO of X, announced on his *Twitter* profile the graduate change of name and brand of the social networking site to X [Musk 2023], as the study was conducted previous to these changes, the authors continue to use the original name. *Twitter* is a public forum, where one can broadcast thoughts to a wider network of followers than on, for instance, *Facebook* [Lee et al. 2020: 818–819]. According to *Eurobarometer*, although *Facebook* and *WhatsApp* are the most popular social networks in Latvia, 13% of respondents had used *Twitter* in the last 7 days [European Parliament 2022] and is frequently among the Top 20 most visited Internet pages in Latvia [Gemius 2022]. Unlike other more popular social media, *Twitter* is asymmetric and decentralized: anyone can follow the feed of anyone else (although there is an option to restrict tweets and give permissions to selected individuals, as well as to block any user [Gruzd et al. 2011: 1296–1303]. Another feature is optional anonymity [Lee et al. 2020: 818]. Some researchers have explored “hashtag activism” on *Twitter* [Ahmed 2018; Grant 2016; Scarborough 2018], even *Twitter* as a community, concluding that *Twitter* does not satisfy all of the “third place” [Oldenburg 1999], characteristics, but “can be used to facilitate community creation and bonding” [McArthur & White 2016: 8]; although “*Twitter* was not originally designed as a tool to support the development of online communities”, they exist as both “real” and “imagined” [Gruzd et al. 2011: 1297–1313].

In the context of mediatization – a “process of change” through which “core elements of a social society or cultural activity (like work, leisure, play etc.)

assume media form” [Hepp & Krotz 2014: 21], Hepp stresses that “support is also about individual personality development, a point that has rarely been addressed empirically nor from a normative point of view in mediatization research” [2020: 198]. Therefore, even though *Twitter* is not necessarily designed to stimulate formation of “portable communities” [Chayko 2007: 375–377], the main aim of this case study is to explore how *Twitter* is used by mothers to socialize, exchange support and narrate their mothering experience within their own “*Twitter*-bubble”. The proposed research questions are:

- Why and how do mothers use *Twitter* in their everyday lives and journey into motherhood?
- Do these motives appear in the tweets of mothers that are part of this *Twitter*-mom community and how?

The case study consists of a narrative analysis of 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews with mothers and a thematic analysis of 1111 tweets, gathered from 9 other public *Twitter* accounts (covering a period of 2 weeks, from 26.10.2022–06.11.2022), that have been identified by interviewees as part of this particular “*Twitter*-bubble”.

Theoretical background

Motherhood in the 21st century

Contemporary motherhood is packed with a variety of cultural, scientific, professional narratives [Sevón 2012: 61], and this experience in Western modernity comes with a seal of “intensive mothering” [Hays 1996] ideology, which is “both drawn upon and resisted” [Miller 2005: 85]. “Intensive mothering” expects mothers to invest seemingly unlimited resources of time, emotional labour, and energy in the wellbeing of the child, occasionally undertaking enormous risk and strain [Hays 1996; Das 2019]; it reproduces traditional gender roles, even idealizing them [Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2017: 277]. According to “intensive mothering” discourse, a “good” mother cherishes her motherhood experience as worthwhile and fulfilling; regretting motherhood is taboo [Matley 2020; Orton-Johnson 2017]. Women expect and are expected to have overwhelming feelings and connection with their babies [Kerrick & Henry 2017: 15].

The mediation and mediatization of motherhood in social media points to a juxtaposition of two discourses – “the emancipatory, feminist revival of women asserting themselves” and “the neo-liberal, self-regulating, self-managing, highly individualized discourse of ideal births”, as Das [2019: 498–499] puts it. Challenging the “intensive mothering” discourse, while simultaneously accepting its terms and interacting with it, is a fragmented scene of several counter-narratives [Micalizzi 2020;

Orton-Johnson 2017; Littler 2020; Tiidenberg & Baym 2017]. A separate group of “alternative” mothering discourses also exists, trying to define motherhood outside the values of neo-liberal, patriarchal society, seeking the voice of actual mothers more aggressively. “Alternative” discourses hold the narratives of “solo-mothers”, mothers with mental health issues [Tiidenberg & Baym 2017], sexual minorities [Kazyak et al. 2016], as well as mothers who are younger or older than the “average” mother [Hyde 2000; Morris & Munt 2019], etc. “Alternative” discourses also lift the taboo from maternal ambivalence, regret, anger, shame, guilt, and other emotions mothers are not supposed to feel [Moore & Abetz 2019: 392].

Motherhood is a subjective experience and contemporary mothers cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group [Lazard et al. 2019: 4]. “Intensive mothering” sets strict and unrealistic norms to which mothers cannot comply, all the while punishing women who cannot meet the standards of ideal motherhood. It is through “challenging” and “alternative” discourses that women narrate their struggles and redefine, what is “normal” or “beautiful” [Yam 2019: 93].

Social media: a bountiful source of remote support?

Even though some research recognises fathers using social media to share their parenting experience, mothers engage in social media to visually document their mothering journey more frequently [Holiday et al. 2020: 238–239; Lazard et al. 2019]. Traditional media often construct news through a masculine prism, ignoring or rendering themes of interest to women un-newsworthy [North 2016: 328], thus, social media add a new dimension to the discourse of motherhood and create a “performative space” [Archer 2019: 47–56], where women may articulate their views and experience. Women turn to social media to raise questions, gain information and advice [Lee et al. 2020: 826], “vent” and share frustrating episodes [Archer & Kao 2018: 123]. Social media help combat the isolation of motherhood and gain empowerment [Archer & Kao 2018: 126], as well as validation of “maternal identity” [Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2017: 279] or realisation of one’s role as a parent [Lee & Chen 2018: 390–406]. However, the digital, extended space also embodies unresolvable conflicts and duality, as some research suggests the link between social media and postpartum depression [Chalklen & Anderson 2017], and other mental health issues or competitiveness between mothers [Chae 2015: 519].

Regarding mothering on *Twitter*, Talbot, Charron and Konkle [2021] have used *Twitter* to gain insight into the reality of pregnant women and mothers, living through the Covid-19 pandemic. *Twitter* as a community has previously been explored by Stewart [2020], Lee, Grogan-Kaylor and Lee [2020], and Mourkazel, Rehn, del Fresno and Daly, illustrating the “unique sub-communities” of breastfeeding [2020], exploring advocacy and community engagement [2021], etc.

Method and research design

The research employs a netnographic approach [Talbot et al. 2021; Kozinets 2010]. First, in January 2022 an open-call on the author's personal *Twitter* profile was posted, asking to participate in a study of motivation to use *Twitter*: the call specified that only women who use *Twitter* daily and identify themselves as “*Twitter*-mothers” or feel part of their “*Twitter*-community” are eligible for participation. 17 women approached the researchers, agreeing to participate in the study. Second, remote, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 11 interviewees were conducted from July to September 2022.

The study considered all ethical research standards in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Approval for conducting interviews was given by the Committee on Ethics. The interviews were recorded without mentioning any names or sensitive data; the transcripts were anonymized, giving each woman a random alias (Table 1).

Table 1. Interviewees' profiles

Given alias	Age	Education	Number (age) of children	Profession
Anna	45	Higher	2 (3 and 5 years old)	Brand manager
Emma	38	Higher	2 (1 and 1.5 years old)	System analyst
Ilze	37	Higher	2 (6 and 9 years old)	Student
Amanda	35	Higher	2 (4 and 7 years old)	Marketing manager
Eliza	35	Higher	2 (6 and 9 years old)	Tourism manager/specialist
Alma	36	Higher	2 (2 and 6 years old)	Researcher
Silva	42	Higher	3 (3, 6 and 11 years old)	Lower-level specialist/office worker
Mare	43	Higher	4 (13, 11, 7 and 3 years old)	Lower-level specialist, doula, breastfeeding consultant
Līva	34	Higher	2 (6 years old, 2 months old)	Educator
Mētra	32	Higher	2 (4 and 2 years old)	Human resources manager
Melisa	33	Higher	1 (1 year old)	Dentist

Next, the data were analysed via narrative analysis, identifying core themes. Then all interviewees were contacted once again and asked to list 5–10 other *Twitter* profiles they recognized as part of their “*Twitter*-community”. Following the method of Ewing and Vu [2020] *Twitter* Application Programming Interface (API) [Twitter 2022] was used to extract tweets from the mentioned public profiles dating from 26.10.2022–06.11.2022, resulting in 1111 tweets. The tweets were analysed through sentiment analysis and an interpretative thematic analysis [Grant 2016: 142–143]. Lastly, the tweets were categorized in accordance to uses of *Twitter*, identified in the interviews.

Results

Interviews with women identifying themselves as “Twitter-mothers”

All 11 women, who characterize themselves as “*Twitter*-mothers” and feel a part of a specific “*Twitter*-community”, reveal that they have been on *Twitter* for several years. Seven of them confess that they have been on *Twitter* since “the beginning”, for 10–13 years, thus, “growing” together with their peers. Some of them, Elīza, Emma, Alma, Melisa, had taken “a pause” from the social network, just to join again (half of them under a pseudonym), when they became pregnant or birthed a child. Women’s narratives bring to light several key themes in how *Twitter* may be used into the journey of motherhood and beyond.

First, *Twitter* is a version of a **digital diary**. Anna emphasizes: “I socialize, and sometimes use *Twitter* as – not exactly – but like a diary to write down, for instance, children’s jokes etc.” For Līva it is a “yell into vacuum”: “a place to talk through an issue before you really deal with it.” Sarma and Ilze stress that *Twitter* is a safe place, where to complain and to “declare everything has gone wrong.” This revelation also resonates with conclusions by Valtchanov, Parry, Glover and Mulcahy, that these internet spaces among a safe online community enable ““rewriting” of motherhood to include more honest, diverse, and supportive experiences” [2015: 63].

Second, *Twitter* is a **window to the world** to peer into lives of people that live “outside” their real-life social circle and a general **source of information**. Amanda concludes: “*Twitter* is like an encyclopaedia illustrating the diversity of motherhood.” To her mind, *Twitter* helps one to “extend horizons”. Līva also points out “other experiences and other perspectives”, whereas Elīza emphasises “different lifestyles” and the existence of a “dad-bubble” as well. For Mare *Twitter* helps to be empathic, as “there is no other place to get to know so many views”. Melisa emphasises the authenticity of these experiences one gets to discover, that cannot be accessed “outside *Twitter*”. Women’s narratives reveal how these different opinions help normalize various mothering styles, stigmatized or even taboo feelings, emotions and behaviour – it gives “a bigger picture” as Mare puts it. Anna focuses on the diversity of

available information from specialists, medical professionals etc. Emma emphasizes not only the speedy receiving of information, but also sharing it and finding other mothers who have experienced similar problems and can give advice. Melisa puts it simply: “You get an essence in *Twitter* (..) in a whirlpool of conversation”, whereas Mare appreciates the variety of themes of conversation and opportunity to learn something about other topicalities beside parenting, happening in the world.

Next, *Twitter*, according to mothers’ narratives, is a **place of protest**. Ilze, Elīza and Līva describe a particular case where *Twitter* played a major role in informing the wider public about the obligation for women in labour to pay for epidural analgesia (although it was supposedly paid by the state) and the difficulties in acquiring it in Latvian hospitals due to bureaucratic technicalities and even unprofessional behaviour from medical staff. Līva comments:

“*Twitter* is a weird social network in Latvia. It’s fast – you get information about topical events several hours if not days before it is broadcasted on TV. (..) It’s an influential platform. *Twitterists* complain (..) and then the problem needs to be dealt with. (..) The speed by which this problem [with epidural analgesia] was dealt with was amazing.”

“You can poke politicians and bureaucrats, and ask for change,” says Ilze. Anna also recognises the influence of *Twitter* on the media agenda or views of politicians and other important public figures, whereas Mare and Ilze recognize the force behind the community of *Twitter*-mothers, who chime in when needed and provide additional evidence, experience or simply a strong word of support. “If someone comes and starts to shame a new mother, others rush to help,” says Mare.

Then, *Twitter*, as per mothers’ records, is a source of support – a feature recognized by all interviewees unanimously, and also present in other research, as, the Internet, in this case *Twitter*, has “the capacity to support and empower women from a range of backgrounds, by offering spaces in which they can be themselves and express their views honestly” as well as to find support in a safe environment [Mackenzie 2018: 119]. Amanda comments: “There are a lot of problems and sometimes you need (..) this sense of having a village.” The feeling of “not being alone” also is expressed by Melisa and Mare, while Sarma says: “What really helps me is [to see] a lot of people with similar problems as me.”

Līva emphasizes support and revealing of honest, pure emotions about oneself, about motherhood; she stresses: “The darkest thoughts are easier to express on social media. (..) You can get a more realistic picture [about motherhood] on *Twitter* [through anonymous accounts], as people are more likely to share their dark thoughts compared to *Instagram*”. Ilze also feels that revealing true, depressive thoughts to loved ones would hurt them, thus, she confesses:

“[In the early months after becoming a mother] *Twitter* was my whole life, my link to the outside world. (..) My parents lived in another city, other relatives –

in a different district. Everyone has his own stuff, thus, only during the pandemic everyone else felt what it's like to stay at home completely alone [although you're not completely alone].”

Anna acknowledges her need to “talk down the anxiety”, and that on *Twitter* one can find a “a shoulder, a person that says – “it's going to be ok”. Melisa also concludes that on *Twitter* there is “permission to make mistakes”. Mare and other mothers mention “venting emotions”: “You can go ahead and whine [on *Twitter*] and there will be 5 other moms that will say *YES! I feel the same way!*”. Alma concludes: “Anonymous *Twitter*-mothers can reveal their emotions completely – if they don't have [an another] confidant.” Honesty and authenticity of narrated experience, emotional support from other mothers and (partial) healing of a sense of loneliness, that had emerged from staying at home with a baby, resonates in all mothers' accounts. Amanda puts it in a different perspective:

“*Twitter* has substituted the almost non-existent post-partum assistance in Latvia. (...) *Twitter* has definitely saved many a new mothers lives by giving a sense she's not alone. (...) Let's face it – does any family physician call and ask how the new mother is doing? (...) *Twitter* values new mothers.”

Amanda and other mothers mention not only emotional, but also physical and financial support, and even offline friendships forged through *Twitter*. Therefore, *Twitter*, as revealed in women's narratives, serves as a platform for interacting with their mom-community. Melisa, who has compared *Twitter* to enjoying a reality show, says: “We all want to belong. (...) I feel I belong to the *Twitter*-bubble, to all anonymous mothers.” Whereas, one mother describes *Twitter* similarly to what Chayko has coined a “portable community” – a network of linked individuals, “who share social interests and norms, social interaction and a common identity, and provide sociability, support, information and a sense of belonging for one another”, bringing their “communities and community members with them wherever they go” [2007: 375–377]. Amanda comments:

“If you don't have any support – and it happens in many cases – as motherhood is a lonely place especially in the first years, (...) the mother is alone, facing her demons. (...) So you go on *Twitter* which comes with you wherever you go – it's an extended room where all your friends (or not friends) are sitting, your support team. They may not come to you, and you may not receive physical support, but you get the feeling and it helps you to keep on going.”

Emma says that “*Twitter* can help during the period of forced isolation”, that occurs frequently when children are little. For Mētra *Twitter* is like a café; for Sarma *Twitter* is “like being in a party and watching how other people socialize and not participating: you can sit in the corner and say nothing, but you can reply to

someone or say something, if you want.” Whereas Amanda compares *Twitter* also to a “Mexican soap-opera where you know Donna Beige”.

Analysis of tweets from the Twitter-bubble

Tweets from most frequently mentioned accounts form the interviewees’ *Twitter*-bubble were also studied. Of the 11 mothers and 1 father, mentioned by all interviewees at least 3 times, three had restricted access and were not included in the sample. In the period of 2 weeks 1111 tweets in total (from 9 *Twitter* profiles) were harvested via *Twitter* API (see Table 2).

Table 2. Most frequently mentioned *Twitter*-profiles by interviewees

Label	Mentions	Number of tweets (24.10.-06.11.2022)
Mom_1 (restricted)	10	–
Mom_2	7	114
Mom_3 (restricted)	7	–
Mom_4	6	99
Mom_5	6	130
Mom_6	6	57
Dad_1	4	148
Mom_7 (restricted)	4	–
Mom_8	4	191
Mom_9	3	230
Mom_10	3	110
Mom_11	3	32
		Total: 1111

Most of these *Twitter* profiles produced at least 110 tweets in 14 days; the majority of these tweets were replies to others, indicating a lively interaction between each other. A manual sentiment analysis on the 1111 tweets reveals that most of them (514 tweets) were positive – displaying either humour, encouragement, happiness, support, or care, containing emoji of love, smiles, laughter etc. 391 tweets were neutral, showing no emotion but rather stating a fact, giving a casual reply, asking a question. 206 tweets were negative, containing anger, outrage, dark sarcasm, sadness. By using the text analysis software *Sketchengine* (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/>), a corpus of 20 822 words from collected tweets was analysed, indicating that the most frequently used noun was *bērns* (“child”), while, clearing the corpus of stop-words, the most frequently used word was *es* (“I”).

In total 143 tweets were not directed towards a specific person (the tweets beginning with “@”). A manual thematic analysis of these statement-tweets reveals several themes that had appeared in the interviews with mothers. Most of these tweets (80) were diary-like entries, recording events of everyday life, thoughts, experiences, including children’s jokes etc. 42 tweets shared valuable information to others, for instance, about shopping deals, trustworthy businesses and specialists, “life-hacks”, etc. 15 tweets provoked conversation or opened a window to the world, sharing a (self-proclaimed) “unpopular” opinion about various topics including parenting. Lastly, 6 tweets contained open questions, asking for information or advice about parenting. Therefore, the sample of tweets from the interviewees’ “*Twitter*-bubble” 1) indicates active conversation with each other, 2) shows sharing of informational as emotional support, as well as – in several tweets – encouragement to show physical or even financial support to particular *Twitter* profiles.

Conclusion

The case-study of a Latvian-speaking community of mothers on *Twitter* provides valuable insight into the 21st century motherhood and the mediatization of mothering. Mothers’ narratives reveal that *Twitter*, an asymmetric and decentralized social media network, may serve as fruitful soil for creation of a “portable” community for parents, especially mothers. For some *Twitter* is a diary to capture every-day moments of a mother’s life, but it also is a source of valuable, individually tailored information and a window to the world, shedding light onto different lifestyles and styles of mothering, nurturing empathy, and challenging the discourse of “intensive mothering”. Mothers’ tweets provide a unique journey into “real motherhood” that respects all emotions, complications and victories as opposed to “intensive mothering” that acknowledges only heteronormative, middle-class “happy” couples, fully content with their role as a parent and oblivious to problems of any kind. In the “safe space” of their *Twitter*-bubble, occasionally behind a veil of anonymity, mothers narrate truthful stories and validate personal feelings in order to normalize their authentic experience and feel supported in the journey into motherhood. *Twitter* provides socialization at time and place of convenience, ensuring a “virtual village” that travels alongside the mother, empowering, encouraging, as well as providing emotional, and even physical and financial support, if needed, during periods of isolation from society or other hardships. The case study has its limitations due to a very particular sample of data and specific focus; however, its findings may be recognized by a spectrum of professionals (from media researchers to healthcare specialists) and researched even further to challenge the disinformation of “real motherhood” and the dominant discourse of “intensive mothering”, as well as find new pathways to provide support to families with children, especially mothers.

Ethics approval

Approval for this research (No. 71-46/63) has been by the Committee on Ethics for the Humanities and Social Sciences of University of Latvia (LU Humanitāro un sociālo zinātņu pētījumu ētikas komiteja).

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