

Digital Ethnographic Project

UWP 101

Thriving Together: Motherhood on Instagram

Introduction

Scrolling through Instagram, children's smiling faces coated with a filter bringing out the soft yellow light in the photo fill up the feed. The caption talks about the mom's struggle of a tantrum occurring 5 minutes after the cute photo was taken. The comments flood with other mother's comments about how that happened to them yesterday, or gave advice on how to get through those 'terrible 2's'. Not having a child could make it hard to relate to the comradery these mothers shared, but there is a clear strong connection these moms were creating over this Instagram post, not even in person. Having a child is a joyful experience, but there are many symptoms (e.g. postpartum, depression, anxiety, etc) and challenges that accompany motherhood that can be hard to overcome. The purpose of this paper is to examine some challenges mothers face, and use this knowledge to try to understand how the support of fellow mothers on Instagram impacts the new journey mothers are encountering.

There are many social media platforms we could observe to try to understand the connection mothers have. This essay will solely look at Instagram. Created in 2010, Instagram has taken off to mean more to people than square photo (Harrison, 2019). The accessible app has become an outlet for its 500 million daily active users (Kolowich, 2019). With this powerful app, people are trying to leave their mark on the world through it. This is something humans have been trying to do since cavemen time; for instance, they would leave painted handprints on cave walls. Decades later, we are still trying to leave our mark but this time, we are leaving our digital handprints (Harrison, 2019). People have the choice to use their digital mark to negatively or positively

impact others. Mothers have learned the power they hold with their choice as they choose to use social media as a communicative and supportive outlet. In a study of a Facebook group called February 2012 moms, the researchers found that the moms within this community mainly used this group for “emotional support”, and once they found this community, they were more likely to use this as their source of support than other social media platforms (Snell, 2012). Snell’s results helped prove that there is a connection made between mothers on social media, but we still need to know how this connection impacts their lives. Also, this study was done through Facebook which is a platform that has different options of communicating than Instagram. Instagram limits people to expressing their main thoughts through a caption illustrated with a photo, and allow users to respond to others with direct messages (DMs), likes, and comments.

Community Information

There are many motherhood accounts on Instagram that could be examined, but for this study, there will only be one account under observation. The community chosen for this study was @this.sweet.grace on Instagram ran by Jackie Lopez. After having an online blog full of random topics for a long time, Jackie was inspired to focus on motherhood when she had her first child, Abby. She took her story to Instagram in February 2018 and formed a community of “women who are already mothers or women in the process of becoming a mother who follow and support each other” which she refers to these people as “mama(s)” (J. Lopez, personal communication, December 1, 2019). This is a public account and there are no requirements to be part of the community. Mamas and other participants (that do not have children) make up the 1,002 followers in this community, so having a child is not a requirement for this community. However, the strong connection is mostly between mamas and Jackie because of similar experiences which will be discussed later in this paper. After analyzing and participating in some

of Jackie's posts, it was observed that mothers bonded over sharing the same struggles Jackie expressed in her post.

Background Knowledge

In order to fully understand the challenges mothers face, there are some topics Jackie usually posted about that needs to be defined. The topics consist of postpartum anxiety, the trials of motherhood, celebrations, and breastfeeding (J. Lopez, personal communication, December 1, 2019). One of the biggest bonding topics in the community is postpartum because it is an exclusive experience that the mamas are able to relate to each other. Postpartum and baby blues happens after childbirth which includes "mood swings, crying spells, anxiety and difficulty sleeping" and all have different time lengths ("Postpartum Depression", 2018). In Czarnock and Slade's study of 298 new mothers who had recently given birth, they found

3% of women who were six weeks postpartum endorsed clinically significant symptoms representative of all three symptoms areas of PTSD (i.e., reexperiencing, numbing/avoidance, increased arousal), and an additional 24.2% endorsed clinically significant symptoms in at least one of three areas. (Wenzel, Haugen, Jackson, & Brendle, 2004)

The beauty of childbirth is often accompanied with a stressor that leads to a "higher incidence" of generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder, social phobia, and major depressive disorder (Wenzel, Haugen, Jackson, & Brendle, 2004). It is necessary to understand the challenges mothers encountered after childbirth because there are lots of struggles that are brushed over with the topic of motherhood. The mamas part of the @this.sweet.grace community broke the silence of

these challenges being hushed. In an interview with the creator of @this.sweet.grace, Jackie spoke about pushing the boundaries:

There's a lot of motherhood and postpartum challenges that happen and no one talks about it because they're afraid or embarrassed, but they shouldn't be. So after going through some of it, I realized I wanted to share it with other women so they wouldn't feel alone/were also just aware of it. (J. Lopez, personal communication, December 1, 2019)

With the background knowledge of the possible ways to communicate on Instagram and the challenges of motherhood, it is the right perspective to observe the interactions within this community.

Terminology and Research Methods

Here are some explanations for terminology and methods used for this observation before beginning the analysis of the interactions. For clarification purposes, when referring to an original photo/post, they are all posted by Jackie so her name will be used instead of the username, but the post can be found under the username @this.sweet.grace. Jackie and Abby's name will be used commonly since most of the photos will be of them. Some of the posts are of objects for which there will be a brief description of the photo. All comments made by other mamas/followers have had their usernames changed to @mamas for privacy, but Jackie's will stay @this.sweet.grace. When referring to @this.sweet.grace account, the terms account, community, or @this.sweet.grace will all be used interchangeably. For the posts chosen to show interactions of support and connection, the @mamas would be considered a "mama" and not a supporter (someone who does not have children and/or experience of some of the challenges mothers can personally relate to) due to the bios of these mama's accounts contain the words

motherhood, community, or mom. Any other accounts that will be named by their actual Instagram username and doesn't fall under the mamas category is because they are considered an organization; such as, @thebump and @waterswipesUSA. They are not considered mamas because the accounts are not managed by one person (no single name in the bio). Also, both are verified accounts which means "Instagram has confirmed that this is the authentic account for the public figure, celebrity or global brand it represents" ("How to Get Verified on Instagram - 6 Instagram Tips To Help Verification [Fun Tool]", 2019). @this.sweet.grace and other mamas accounts typically aren't verified because they are personal accounts which have less chances of someone having a "reason for somebody to impersonate you" ("How to Get Verified on Instagram - 6 Instagram Tips To Help Verification [Fun Tool]", 2019). Lastly, all statistics of @this.sweet.grace account, such as amount of posts and number of followers, were recorded on December 2nd, 2019 and are subject to change.

Three Posts Observed and Analyzed

With the terminology defined, there are three posts that will be focused on to analyze the interactions between mamas in this community. The first is a photo of Abby kissing Jackie's stomach where the viewer can see the c-section scar. In the caption of the post, she discussed how she underestimated the beauty behind the scar, and she didn't see how strong mothers' bodies were. Two verified organization accounts commented under this post, asking if they could share it on their page. One was @thebump (560,000 Instagram followers) which is the Instagram account for organization thebump whose purpose is to help "first-time millennial parents the lowdown on fertility, pregnancy, birth and babies" (About Us). The other was @waterwipesUSA (13,600 Instagram followers) which mainly sells baby wipes and uploads motivational posts. These two accounts sharing Jackie's deep post about c-section scar will show moms and others

that it isn't something to hide under clothes with shame. Having the verified accounts stand with a regular mom tells their followers that they are using their brand and their digital mark to spread good for other moms who may feel their battle scar is "GROSS" as Jackie initially thought it was. This was more of an abstract example of support in this community, but concrete examples of support were demonstrated in the comments. One interaction observed was:

@mama: beautiful photos and beautiful words mama! I didn't understand the beauty until I experienced it myself. Now I'm enamored by belly photos like this- so much love and beauty

@this.sweet.grace replied: it's seriously taught me so much more about myself and how I see others too (orange heart emoji)

Because the mama stated how she never realized until she experienced it for herself showed how there are some experiences someone within this community cannot relate to unless they go through it themselves. Mamas are able to bond over this shared thought which makes the scar relatable rather than shameful because no one else felt that way. "...moms today need to know that they aren't alone and can share real raw moments..." and by sharing this photo allowed moms to bond with each other because it's a raw moment only they are able to experience (J. Lopez, personal communication, December 1, 2019)

The second post was Jackie's favorite moment on @this.sweet.grace which was when she opened up about her anxiety (J. Lopez, personal communication, December 1, 2019). The post was a picture of an oil roller used to help ease anxiety, the caption said:

I hesitated sharing this because I feel it's so personal but I also told myself I would be honest. I've always carried a great deal of stress and anxiety, so much so that I get sick. After having the baby it got worse and I started having panic

attacks. They weren't due to my sweet babe but more so due to the fact that things were far beyond my control... All that said and done and this is what I've learned: you don't thrive alone, you thrive together.

Here is where the background knowledge of knowing the symptoms of postpartum becomes helpful; however, sometimes even knowing the facts of this challenge doesn't help. Just the knowledge of the symptoms doesn't come close to the validated feeling of hearing others' personal experience. Being able to share our weaknesses with others makes us vulnerable, but being supported by others builds up strength and confidence. One reassuring mama commented "I can totally relate! Being a mom is tough but you got this!" Just like the February mom study, these mamas in this community found solace because they were built up with support rather than torn down for their weaknesses. Jackie recalled after posting this photo:

I received so many messages from people after... thanking me for sharing and being vulnerable and open to talking about it. I think that one stands out because it was really vulnerable for me but sharing it helped someone else feel less alone...

(J. Lopez, personal communication, December 1, 2019)

This showed how it started conversation for both sides of the phone.

The third post was the more positive topics Jackie discussed which was celebrations. The photo was of Abby asleep wrapped in a sling on Jackie. It had a caption wishing Abby a happy first birthday. On this post, many mamas came together to celebrate a child they have never met in real life, but all the mamas showered Abby in love and praise. Some of the comments were mamas that shared their own experiences about their child's birthday.

@mama: why do our little ones grow up so fast?! (crying emoji).

@this.sweet.grace replied: I wish I could rewind sometimes (crying emoji)

@mama replied: me too!!!

It was a celebratory cause because a mom has overcome a lot of challenges within that year while their child is growing up. A mom can feel emotionally torn from this event because they should be happy that they survived the terrible teething and witnessed their baby's first steps, but it can be sad at the same time because their baby is slowly becoming more independent. But this community eased the emotional strain a mother might feel. The mama that commented under this birthday post commented on another the pre-birthday post. (There were 2 other birthday posts. One before posted the day before Abby's birthday and one posted at Abby's birthday party three days later). This mama commented "I truly believe us moms can never have too much support! Can't wait to follow along each other's mom journeys! (heart emoji)". The loyal follower showed that they will be there for Jackie with support. And the support isn't one sided either. Jackie shared "I've gotten lots of encouragement from other moms...but I've also been able to encourage back" (J. Lopez, personal communication, December 1, 2019). The support is shared between two mothers who are at different stages in their journey, but are ready to help each other through it all.

Conclusion

After observing @this.sweet.grace, researchers have witnessed the support the community gave each other. It was amazing to observe the constant support these mothers gave each other without ever have met in real life, but it's the realness the posts talk about that makes the connection true. Because Jackie was honest with her anxiety post, that made her a real person with real challenges and ultimately, made her relatable. It didn't matter if her and her mamas never met in real life, they were there for each other. One mom will be facing a problem in real life, but won't be alone because of their online community's support. Looking at Jackie's

account from the perspective of someone who has not gone through the motherhood trials, one could wonder how someone would have felt if they didn't express the thoughts Jackie shared to her followers. Relating back to posts, if her thoughts of c-section scars, or anxiety and postpartum symptoms were not shared, many mothers would not have known that other mothers feel this way too. It is easier to do a hard task in multiples than as one.

By opening up and discussing these topics, Jackie has welcomed mamas and others into her community to support and lift up each other during their motherhood journey. This community is where these mothers will look to during stressful times. Before the observation, there was an unanswered reason as to why there was an increase in motherhood accounts. Being a mother has been going on for a long time, a lot longer than Instagram, so why would there be an increase in these accounts? Moms are taking advantage of the resource of being able to connect with others on this difficult journey. With this new tool, mothers are able to "get advice" and not have to "pretend to have it all together" all the time (J. Lopez, personal communication, December 1, 2019). It's a scary thought to make yourself vulnerable and show your flaws to a thousand people as Jackie had done with her community, but it's what has helped her journey. Prior to the observation, it was known that motherhood isn't easy, but knowing the emotional toll it takes on the mothers wasn't known until the amount of mothers who were able to relate to Jackie and her struggles were noted. These mamas empowered each other and did not judge each other about one's struggles. They gave each other advice and only wanted the other to be a better mother. The support from one mama to another in this community showed how "you don't thrive alone, you thrive together" (J. Lopez, personal communication, December 1, 2019).

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