

# Connected Motherhood: Social Support for Moms and Moms-to-Be on Facebook

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## Abstract

**Background:** Research addressing online social support, especially for new mothers, has typically focused on forums and dedicated Web sites, and not on social networking sites like Facebook. Here we expand on this existing body of work by addressing a Facebook page, *Ask the Chicks*, themed around questions and answers related to motherhood. Using the uses and gratification lens, we explore motivations for participation as they relate to engagement with the page. **Materials and Methods:** Individuals were recruited to participate in an online survey through posts on the *Ask the Chicks* Facebook page made by the page owner over a 1-week period. To be eligible to complete the survey, participants had to be 18 years old or older, female, and pregnant or have at least one child under the age of 5 years. **Results:** Analyses of survey data collected from users of the page (n=647) revealed that engagement has a positive relationship with the motives of relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, social interaction, and information seeking. **Conclusions:** Online support groups, and especially Facebook, appear to be a more convenient method than traditional online support groups for people who want to obtain information about certain topics, in this case, about motherhood and raising kids. Having this type of social support tool is important, as social support has been found to reduce levels of stress, which can improve overall health and quality of life. This study provides a better understanding of why people use this type of social support group for questions about parenting.

**Key words:** behavioral health, e-health, technology, telehealth

## Introduction

Having a new baby is an extraordinary experience for most women. Even for those who are well prepared, it can be a disorienting experience. In the past, women often relied on neighbors and family living close by for support. However, shifts in the contemporary social structure have resulted in many

women feeling removed both emotionally and geographically from social support and help.<sup>1,2</sup> In response, some new mothers have turned to online support groups to connect to other mothers, ask questions, and share information.

Online health information seeking is growing in popularity. Approximately 72% of American adult Internet users have used the Web to seek out health information. Online support groups are one of the platforms people use to seek health information.<sup>3</sup> These groups allow people with a common bond, such as a shared interest or similar life situation, to engage in a supportive community and exchange information.<sup>4-6</sup> These support systems have several benefits, including the ability to transcend geography and time constraints and to facilitate the exchange of diverse information.<sup>1,7</sup>

In addition to the benefits gained from the dispersed and diverse nature of the Web, social support has been demonstrated to help reduce feelings of stress and promote well-being.<sup>8-10</sup> Barak et al.<sup>11</sup> suggested that people going through similar situations can understand and offer support better than those who have not experienced the situation. Furthermore, social support sites may also allow users to feel more empowered. The information shared by individuals can help others make more informed decisions and empower them to take different actions than they may have previously considered.<sup>12</sup> Empowerment, in this context, is defined as the ability for individuals to believe they have a right and responsibility to make decisions about their life. It also extends to the individuals having a greater sense of self-efficacy, believing they can make these changes.<sup>13-15</sup> Online support through these specialized forums can offer individuals a sense of empowerment through the exchange of information, providing and receiving emotional support, and asking for and receiving help, as well as providing entertainment.<sup>11</sup>

Studying a social support group for moms, Schoenebeck<sup>9</sup> found that moms who used these forums were able to violate perceived cultural social norms related to a modern woman's role as a mother while gaining feelings of support or empathy. Others have found Internet forums provide a place where women from various backgrounds can connect and share information, including information around sensitive topics that they might not have shared previously.<sup>1,16</sup> Additionally, some research has demonstrated social support group membership can lessen stress for women and empower them in their mothering.<sup>17</sup> Through a content analysis of a pregnancy/new mother online forum, researchers sought to understand the reasons behind its use and found that women had three main motivations: exchange of information, peer support, and self-empowerment.<sup>18</sup>

Facebook is becoming a common source of online social support. Facebook is a social network site that allows people to stay connected

through posts, messages, comments, and “likes.” Vitak and Ellison<sup>19</sup> conducted a qualitative study to better understand how people exchange information and receive support through the site. They found that people preferred to ask questions of their social network instead of using a search engine because it allowed them to quickly get answers to their specific questions. There is some evidence that there are certain issues and situations, including emotional concerns or wanting information quickly, in which many people would rather turn to other lay people who have had a similar experience to meet their own informational needs.<sup>3</sup> One of those topics is the challenge of motherhood.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The main objective of this study was to determine the motivations of using a Facebook page focused on pregnancy and motherhood. The uses and gratifications (U&G) framework provides a useful theoretical lens through which to understand varying individual motives for using specific forms of media. In particular, the U&G focus on needs and goal attainment of individual users allows researchers to make sense of behavioral differences and expectations related to media use.<sup>20</sup> Given the ability of different forms of media to satisfy different needs, the U&G framework has been applied to a wide variety of media, including print,<sup>21,22</sup> radio,<sup>23</sup> television,<sup>24</sup> video-games,<sup>25</sup> MP3 players,<sup>26</sup> and general Internet use.<sup>27,28</sup> An ever-growing body of literature uses the U&G framework to decipher why and how people use different types of social media, including online communities,<sup>29</sup> YouTube,<sup>30</sup> and social network sites.<sup>31–38</sup>

Addressing Facebook specifically, the U&G framework has been used largely to understand use at the macro-level. For example, one study demonstrated that motives related to photographs, social investigation, and status updates were able to significantly predict how frequently users visited the site.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, Papacharissi and Mendelson<sup>34</sup> developed nine scales for measuring motives for using Facebook: habitual pass time, relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, escapism, cool and new trend, companionship, professional advancement, social interaction, and meeting new people. Using these scales, researchers compared the motives for using individual Facebook features (status updates, comments, wall posts, private messages, chat, and groups) with motives for general Facebook use (time spent on Facebook).<sup>37</sup> Results found that motives differed between general and specific types of use, indicating that studying use at the macro-level paints an incomplete picture of use.

### THE CURRENT STUDY

This study specifically examines a Facebook page that, driven by the followers of a similarly themed blog, organically grew into a support network for pregnant women and new moms. The group was chosen for this study because of the manner in which it was created and its existence on Facebook. As a Facebook page, this support network is a part of users’ on-site social network, allowing their use to become incorporated into their normal Facebook use, instead of requiring them to log in to a dedicated forum. These factors differentiate the group from typical online support groups, which often exist within bounded systems developed for hosting forums devoted to

numerous support topics, providing an opportunity for unique insights into the motivations of the users. A popular pregnancy blog, Pregnant Chicken, based out of Canada, started a Facebook page in early 2013. Shortly thereafter, women began messaging the blogger to post questions to ask other people who “liked” the page. Approximately 2 months later the Pregnant Chicken Facebook page was being overrun by questions. In response, the blogger created another Facebook page, Ask the Chicks.

In practice, the Ask the Chicks page functioned like this: women would send questions to the blogger who maintained the page, and she would post their questions anonymously. Other users would then provide their insights through the site’s comment feature. Question subjects ranged from pregnancy to childbirth and childrearing. The Facebook page was open, meaning that anyone who found that page could read the content. Additionally, although the questions were posted anonymously by the moderator, when a user commented on a question other people in their personal network were made aware of the comment through Facebook’s News Feed and Ticker features. Consequently, this created a much wider audience for questions than just people who had “liked” the page, as those who viewed comments through the News Feed could also comment on the question as well.

For the sake of clarity, the term “member” is used here to describe Facebook users who “liked” the Ask the Chicks page. Additionally, although the Ask the Chicks page was just that, a page, and did not use the Facebook “group” feature, users commonly referred to it as a group. In the context of this study, use of the term group parallels the use by the members of Ask the Chicks and is not used to refer to the formal “group” feature of Facebook.

## Materials and Methods

### DATA COLLECTION

Participants were recruited through a series of four posts on the Ask the Chicks Facebook page made by the page owner over a 1-week period (September 6–13, 2013). The questionnaire took approximately 10–15 min to complete. To be eligible to complete the survey, participants had to be 18 years old or older (self-reported), female, and pregnant or have at least one child under the age of 5 years.

Survey questions addressed frequency of Internet and Facebook use, group engagement, and motivations for using the group, as well as feelings of social support and empowerment. An open-ended question allowed participants to share additional comments about the group. Demographic information was also collected.

Group engagement was measured by asking participants how often they read the questions, how often they read the responses (comments), how many times they commented on questions, and how many questions they asked. To determine the motivations for reading posts, the U&G validated motive scales of Papacharissi and Mendelson<sup>34</sup> were used, to measure relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, escapism, companionship, social interaction, and habitual pass time. Information seeking was created for this study, by modifying the statements from the expressive information-sharing construct to reflect seeking or gaining information instead of providing information. These scales used a 5-point Likert-type scale

(strongly agree to strongly disagree). A validated scale was used to measure the perceived social support provided by the group.<sup>40</sup> This 10-item scale measures specific behavior “on the part of the supported and supporting persons.”<sup>40,p.20</sup> This scale used a “yes,” “no,” and “don’t know” answer format, the “don’t know” responses were coded as a missing value. Finally, the perceived level of empowerment was measured using a scale developed by Koren et al.,<sup>41</sup> although only the “Family Level” portion was used. This 11-item validated scale was developed to determine the level of empowerment individuals felt, specifically in regard to raising and providing care for their children.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The variables of interest were measured by using the scales previously mentioned; each of the constructs (social support, empowerment, engagement, and each motivation) were captured by a set of items contained in the scales. Each construct was measured by using factor analysis within a latent variable framework. Each of the constructs was unidimensional with a reliability (alpha coefficient) of 0.772–0.906, except for three of the constructs. Social interaction only had two indicators, and because Cronbach’s alpha is sensitive to the number of items, it is therefore not a good indicator of reliability for this construct. Engagement and social support had multiple missing values when using listwise deletion so the alpha coefficient was not estimated for these constructs. However, all constructs (including the three previously mentioned) performed well under confirmatory factor analysis; the fit of the unidimensional structure was good (values reported with each of the models).

The constructs of interest and their relationships were analyzed using latent variable models in the Mplus statistical software.<sup>42</sup> The items used as indicators of the constructs were analyzed as ordinal variables because participants responded to Likert scales, and the models were estimated by using weighted least squares.

**Results**

**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

When this study was conducted (September 6–15, 2013) there were approximately 1,300 people who “liked” the Ask the Chicks page. Six hundred forty-seven women completed this survey, for a response rate of approximately 49%. Three-quarters of the women (75.6%) were between 25 and 34 years old. *Table 1* gives demographic information. Over half of the women reported that they worked outside of the home. Most of the women who responded were from the United States (73.7%), Canada (16.2%), Australia (4%), and the United Kingdom (2.2%). However, 18 other countries were also represented. Over 90% of the women reported they were married and had one to two children. Just under half of the respondents (42.4%) reported that they had a 4-year college degree. Ninety-eight percent of the women reported using the Internet several times a day, and 90.1% reported using Facebook several times a day. There was a fairly even distribution of the length of time participants had been members of this page. Seventy-nine participants included additional comments in the open-ended section.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics		
VARIABLE	N	%
Age (years)		
18–24	49	7.6%
25–34	485	75%
35–44	112	17.3%
45–54	1	0.2%
Marital status		
Married	587	90.7%
In a serious relationship	41	6.3%
Single	13	2%
Widowed	1	0.2%
Missing	5	0.8%
Education		
Professional degree	25	3.9%
Doctoral degree	17	2.6%
Masters degree	140	21.7%
4-year college degree	274	42.4%
2-year college degree	66	10.2%
Some college	90	13.9%
High school degree/GED	29	4.5%
Less than high school	5	0.8%
Missing	1	0.2%
Employment		
Work outside the home (full-time)	263	40.6%
Work outside the home (part-time)	88	13.6%
Stay-at-home (full-time)	203	31.4%
Student	10	1.5%
Other	83	12.8%
Number of children		
1	466	72%
2	141	21.8%
3	29	4.5%
4	9	1.4%
5	2	0.3%
How long have you been following Ask the Chicks?		
Less than 1 month	33	5.1%
1–3 months	174	26.9%
4–6 months	236	36.5%
7–9 months	204	31.5%

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**Table 2. Effects of Ask the Chicks Use by Engagement**

DEPENDENT VARIABLE	ESTIMATE	STANDARD ERROR	P VALUE
Entertainment	0.602	0.112	<0.001
Information sharing	0.739	0.112	<0.001
Escapism	-0.142	0.098	0.147
Companionship	0.082	0.095	0.387
Social interaction	0.473	0.108	<0.001
Habit	-0.397	0.102	<0.001
Information seeking	0.613	0.107	<0.001

**MOTIVATIONS**

The relationships between engagement and the multiple motivations (relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, escapism, companionship, social interaction, habitual pass time, and information seeking) were analyzed in a single latent variable model (root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA]=0.060, comparative fit index [CFI]=0.969, Tucker Lewis Index [TLI]=0.964).

The motivations that showed a statistical significance when regressed with engagement and had a positive relationship were relaxing entertainment ( $p<0.001$ ), expressive information sharing ( $p<0.001$ ), social interaction ( $p<0.001$ ), and information seeking ( $p<0.001$ ) (Table 2). This means that high values of engagement correspond with high values for each of these motivations. From the remaining motivations, habitual pass time showed a negative significant relationship ( $p<0.001$ ), which means that for participants with a high level of engagement it was very unlikely that they would be accessing the Facebook group out of habit. The two remaining motivations, escapism and companionship, did not show a signifi-

cant relationship with levels of engagement. The correlations and the descriptive statistics of the motivations are provided in Table 3.

**ENGAGEMENT, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND EMPOWERMENT**

The three constructs of engagement, social support, and empowerment were captured simultaneously with a latent variable model (RMSEA=0.035, CFI=0.980, TLI=0.978). The model also captured the correlations between each of the constructs. The correlations that were statistically significant were between engagement and social support ( $p<0.001$ ) and between engagement and empowerment ( $p=0.001$ ). Both of these relationships are positive; this means that those who are more engaged with the group have higher perceptions of empowerment and social support.

**Discussion**

This article sought to better understand the motivations of women who use the Ask the Chicks Facebook page and to determine if their use of this page was related to their feelings of social support and empowerment. Using the U&G framework, this study demonstrated the reasons that women used this Facebook page were for entertainment, social interaction, information sharing, and information seeking. These findings align well with the use of traditional online social support groups.<sup>7,43</sup> One way to interpret these findings is that information seeking and sharing in this context offer women new information from a diverse population because the group is made up of solely weak ties. That is, connections to people who are not in the same social circle and can provide a different perspective and information to the group.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, Facebook affords for an immediacy of information exchange that can be tailored to the requestor's own experience, and this has been found to be perceived as better than the information one would receive by simply performing a Web search.<sup>2,18,19,45</sup> As one of the respondents stated, "I often rely on Google when I need help, but prefer to get advice from mums that have lived through it."

**Table 3. Correlation Analysis of Motivations and Descriptive Statistics**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	MEAN <sup>a</sup>	SD
1. Entertainment	1.00							3.18	0.63
2. Information sharing	0.44 <sup>b</sup>	1.00						2.89	0.84
3. Escapism	0.12 <sup>b</sup>	0.07	1.00					1.25	0.94
4. Companionship	0.13 <sup>b</sup>	0.10 <sup>b</sup>	0.68 <sup>b</sup>	1.00				1.37	1.04
5. Social interaction	0.30 <sup>b</sup>	0.40 <sup>b</sup>	0.32 <sup>b</sup>	0.33 <sup>b</sup>	1.00			1.84	0.81
6. Habit	0.03	-0.15 <sup>b</sup>	0.45 <sup>b</sup>	0.28 <sup>b</sup>	0.06	1.00		2.03	0.89
7. Information seeking	0.41 <sup>b</sup>	0.44 <sup>b</sup>	0.12 <sup>b</sup>	0.35 <sup>b</sup>	0.40 <sup>b</sup>	-0.07	1.00	3.33	0.52

<sup>a</sup>Items were measures with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 5="strongly agree" to 1="strongly disagree."

<sup>b</sup> $p<0.05$ , indicating a significant difference.

SD, standard deviation.



Entertainment was also a motive of use. This is likely an artifact of two things, the first being that Facebook is an application that is supposed to be fun to use.<sup>32</sup> Second, the Ask the Chicks group developed out of the Pregnant Chicken blog, which is also meant to be a fun blog on pregnancy and child-rearing. One woman who responded to the survey said, "I love the page and find it fun and entertaining and surprisingly non-judgmental considering how large the following is." Previous research suggests that women enjoy hearing about these topics from other women, a claim that is also supported by our findings.<sup>2,43,45,46</sup>

Social interaction related to Ask the Chicks was also found to be a motive for frequenting the page. Past research on online social support has found that people enjoy interacting with other people who are experiencing the same issues.<sup>6,7,47</sup> Also, because of the shift in the way people are living, new mothers may now feel more isolated than previously. Many women with full-time jobs may not have friends with children and may also live far from their own families.<sup>1,17</sup> The Ask the Chicks group allows women an opportunity to interact with other mothers about relevant and current issues. Another participant stated, "I have almost NO friends who have kids, so this is my source for questions I don't feel comfortable asking my in-laws or parents."

It is interesting that women who were less engaged with the group tended to use the Ask the Chicks more out of habit than anything else. An overwhelming majority of the survey respondents reported that they used Facebook several times a day, and we posit that it was out of habit they were reading the posts in their "News Feed." Therefore, it seems to indicate that it might be more of a habit to use Facebook, rather than the Ask the Chicks page itself.

Women with higher levels of engagement with the group felt that they had positive social support and felt empowered in regard to being a mother. This study is unable to tease apart if use of the site provided them with those feelings, or if they came to the site with those perceptions. However, based on some of the open-ended responses, there is evidence that at least some respondents felt they had more social support and were more empowered as a result of their use of Ask the Chicks. For example, as one woman stated, "Its [sic] awesome to know I'm not the only one going through crazy stuff with my kids!" This study was also able to demonstrate that both social support and empowerment were highly correlated with their levels of engagement. This makes sense, as one of the purposes of online social support networks is to provide an environment in which people share information and provide empathic support, behaviors that have been linked to fostering a greater perception of empowerment. Indeed, being more informed has been shown to have the biggest impact on empowerment.<sup>18,47,48</sup> Additionally, past studies have found that even lurkers, those individuals who do not actively engage with the group, may also benefit and gain feelings of empowerment simply from reading questions and the comments posted by others.<sup>49</sup>

Benefits acquired through lurking have direct implications for the current study as approximately 20% of the women who responded in the open-ended section stated that they did not comment on

questions because their personal Facebook network could see their posts. These participants felt that some of the information was not appropriate to share with their own personal network. One woman responded, "I know there's no way around it, but there have been many times that I've wanted to comment on a question but, due to the sensitive or personal nature of the question, I don't want my friends to see that I've commented, so I haven't." This comment speaks to a perceived barrier to participation resulting from the manner in which Ask the Chicks used Facebook, choosing to exist as a page instead of using Facebook's group feature. However, since the conclusion of this study the moderator of Ask the Chicks has converted the page into a "members only" Facebook group, which keeps comments on questions from appearing in the users' News Feed and Ticker.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As with all studies of this nature, the current research has some limitations. First, although the response rate was close to 50%, the sample was self-selected from the Ask the Chicks group. Furthermore, although the social ties are best classified as weak, it seems to be a somewhat homogeneous population. Although results provide a sense of the motivations for using Ask the Chicks, those motivations are not generalizable to other support groups on Facebook. Additionally, as stated previously, we are unable to determine if using the site actually improved perceptions of social support and empowerment. However, since this data collection has ended and the site has grown and become a "members only" group, we are hoping to conduct a second round of data collection to determine if this has made a difference in the level of engagement. Moreover, since the group has migrated to this format, any member of the group can now post the questions, as opposed to the prior arrangement in which the moderator posted questions for members. We are curious about the social capital implications of the new organizational structure of the group.

## Conclusions

Online support groups, and especially Facebook, appear to be a more convenient method than traditional online support groups for people who want to obtain information about certain topics, in this case about motherhood and raising kids. Support groups on Facebook lower the barriers to entry for those who already have an account, unlike stand-alone support group sites, which often require new users to create a new account. Having this type of social support tool is important, as social support has been found to reduce levels of stress, which can improve overall health and quality of life. This study provides a better understanding of why people use this type of social support group for questions about parenting. Support groups rooted in social network sites like Facebook might also be beneficial because people are using these sites regularly as a part of their daily routine, lowering the barriers to membership. Additionally, because lurkers also benefit from reading questions and comments, social support groups located on Facebook might also serve people hesitant

to directly participate, potentially helping improve their sense of social support and empowerment.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Amy Morrison, the creator of the blog Pregnant Chicken ([www.pregnantchicken.com](http://www.pregnantchicken.com)) and the Facebook groups Pregnant Chicken and Ask the Chicks, along with all of the members of this community who answered this survey.

## Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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*Received: June 12, 2014*

*Revised: July 21, 2014*

*Accepted: July 23, 2014*

**This article has been cited by:**

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