Adolescent mothers' use of social networking sites, and their positive contribution to mental health outcomes

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Background

Adolescent motherhood is linked to significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety disorders than for older mothers, with these mental illnesses often manifesting themselves, or continuing to be present long after the actual birth (Coelho et al., 2013; McCracken and Loveless, 2014; Boden et al., 2008).

In 2016, the 'explosion' of social media has afforded the majority of Australian adolescent mothers access to social networking sites (SNS) via mobile phones or tablet devices. SNS have been demonstrated to provide social support and an improved sense of community to sufferers of many conditions and diseases, those marginalised from society and those at risk of depression (Notley 2009; Barnfather et al., 2011; Gowen et al., 2012).

To date, research into online support for adolescent mothers has largely involved online communities specifically created for adolescent mothers with the main focus being the examination of online content (Dunham et al., 1998; Hudson et al., 1999,2009,2012; Kauppi & Garg, 2008, Sherman & Greenfield, 2013). Quantitative methods have been used to measure use of the Internet by adolescent mothers (Logsdon et al.,2014;2015).

Objective of the research

To explore the use of SNS by adolescent mothers in Western Australia (WA) in relation to social support and the building of social capital.

Method

Narrative inquiry was used in this study. Narrative Inquiry is a process of gathering information (data) through storytelling. These stories are a reflection of multiple realities, and are used by researchers wanting to uncover the meanings behind peoples actions and experiences.

Human beings, individually and collectively lead storied lives and are storytelling organisms by nature (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). The study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world, and in this case the ways adolescent mothers living in Western Australia experience SNS use.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University Human Ethics Committee. Adolescent mothers were invited to participate in in-depth interviews to elicit stories relating to their uses of SNS. The narratives were analysed and manually coded to develop themes.

Findings

12 adolescent mothers self-selected for in-depth interviewing over the course of the study, seven for individual interviews and five for a subsequent focus group interview.

The five themes identified were **social connectedness, increased parenting confidence, reduced parental stress, enhanced self-disclosure and access to information** (Nolan et al., 2015).

Social Connectedness

Nearly all of the mothers interviewed reported their SNS use to be 'on & off all day'. SNS use enabled them to feel connected to both established and newly created social groups, with the ability to freely connect to other mothers often rated as 'a lifeline'.

Parenting Confidence

Advice, reassurances and 'likes' received via SNS were reported to improve confidence with both parenting and general self-esteem / self-worth.

Parental stress

The ability to vent feelings and frustrations 'in the moment' and to others 'who understand' via SNS was described as a valued means of reducing parental stress.

Enhanced self-disclosure

Some mothers felt able to disclose their feelings and anxieties more openly and honestly via SNS than they would during face-to-face conversations.

Access to information

Peer-led advice and information was the most valued form of support identified, however many of the mothers interviewed were also keen for midwives and/or other health professionals to engage in the SNS environment to provide accurate health information, links to community events, and to offer professionally validated peer groups.

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Conclusions

For many of the mothers interviewed, SNS use was considered 'a lifeline' in terms of their coping strategies and mental wellbeing. Themes identified within this study suggest that SNS use offers adolescent mothers valuable social support and enhances their social capital in terms of their ability to connect to social groups and receive tangible, emotional and informational support.

Midwives and Child Health Nurses (CHN's) are in a prime position to ensure that young mothers appreciate the mental health improvement opportunities that can be afforded by SNS use, and to advocate ways to improve their online safety within the SNS environment.

The social capital related themes identified within this study suggest that midwives could possibly enhance mental health outcomes for this group of mothers simply by promoting careful use of SNS.

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