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Is it Friday yet? Mothers talking about sex online

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Abstract

Inspired by the media furore over 'penis beaker gate' (October 2013), this article investigates the discussion of sex on the UK parenting website Mumsnet. It asks why there was such shock at finding mothers discussing sexual matters online, what types of discussion related to sex can actually be found on Mumsnet and why women use Mumsnet to discuss these matters. It suggests that the Internet in general offers a new place for women to discuss and discover their sexuality and that Mumsnet in particular offers an interactive and anonymous forum for women whose needs in this area are not met by the mainstream media. On Mumsnet women seek advice and support from others in similar situations, attempt to establish 'norms' relating to sexual behaviour, and supplement information given by health professionals.

Keywords: sex; mothers; Mumsnet

Introduction

In October 2013 the mass media in the UK was gripped by what became known as 'penis beaker gate'. A poster with the pseudonym 'SaraCrewe' started a thread on the discussion forum of the popular parenting internet site Mumsnet to ask other women whether her partner's behaviour was normal. She explained that he kept a plastic beaker filled with water by the side of the bed during sex and then 'dunked' his penis in afterwards to clean it. The discussion thread attracted hundreds of posts, but 100% of posters assured her that, no, this was not normal behaviour. The thread, which was described in the media in terms that ranged from 'bawdy' and 'funny' to 'sleazy' and 'obscene', soon became notorious outside the confines of the Mumsnet boards and was discussed throughout the Internet and in the national and international press. There was a high-brow comment piece in *The Guardian* newspaper that managed to reference Rousseau and anarcho-feminism (although tongue-in-cheek), reports of the Mumsnet server nearly crashing in *The Daily Star* and *The Mirror* newspapers and comment pieces in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. A male reporter from *The Independent* ventured onto the Mumsnet site and returned, shaken, to write an article on 'the darker side of Mumsnet' having found a thread entitled 'Just Shagging Part 18', although he did eventually admit that the thread was a support thread for those trying to conceive naturally (Peck, October 25, 2013). Meanwhile, the doyenne of the Radio 4 programme *Woman's Hour*, Jenni Murray, herself a campaigner on issues relating to women's health, wrote a piece for *The Daily Mail* detailing her shock and horror at the material she found on the Mumsnet discussion boards. In particular she was upset by a thread entitled 'Just wondering how often people have sex when you've been together and have kids. What's normal?' and another written by a poster who was considering engaging in a threesome. Blaming Ann Summers and *Fifty Shades of Grey* for the sharing of 'too much information' on the site, she concluded, 'I think, in my heart, I feel that what goes on in the bedroom — and I don't really care what it is as long as no one is coerced, forced or harmed by it — should remain in the bedroom' (Murray, October 25, 2013, p.16).

This article asks why there was such a reaction to the idea of mothers discussing sex online, what exactly the users of Mumsnet are talking about, and why they need to go online to find advice on sex. Why did

the revelation that mothers could talk about sex in a humorous, bawdy manner, sharing information and tips, so shock and horrify commentators? It is part of a wider study of Mumsnet that is investigating the uses that women (and some men) make of Mumsnet (see Pedersen & Smithson, 2013, 2010). It is argued that Mumsnet is a place where women can seek the advice and support relating to sexual practices that is difficult to find elsewhere. While women's magazines frequently run articles on sex, the vast majority of these are aimed at younger women, who are usually not in long-term relationships and have not had children. Neither do parenting magazines offer much advice on the topic of mothers and sexuality (Shipps & Caron, 2013). Advice on immediate post-birth sex and any complications can be accessed from midwives and other health professionals, but there are few places where advice about sex with long-term partners, in the years following childbirth and with the complications of family life, or after divorce with a new partner, or as a middle-aged woman with concerns about her changing body, can be freely accessed. While feminists have criticised the limitations placed on the sex education in school (Frith, 2014), there is even less information available to adults. One place that does offer such information is the Internet, but the use of the Internet for sex-education purposes and the quality of what is available is under researched (Boynton, 2007; Daneback, Månsson, Ross, & Markham, 2012). There is a need to further research the sex advice available through the Internet, which may help us to identify the particular needs of different groups and thus tailor the information provided (Daneback et al., 2012). This article argues that discussion forums such as Mumsnet allow women the opportunity to interact and share experiences and advice anonymously with other women. In particular, they allow women such as SaraCrewe to establish 'the norm' without suffering the embarrassment of discussing her personal situation with friends, family or health-care professionals.

Literature Review

We don't like to think about our mothers having sex. Studies of the portrayal of mothers in popular media suggest that women can be either mothers or sexual people, but not both, and that the topics of sexuality and motherhood are mutually exclusive (Shipps & Caron, 2013). There is limited discussion of sex in the context of pregnancy and childbirth advice once pregnancy has been achieved, and what discussion there is mostly focuses on 'post-partum sex', which is often portrayed as the time when mothers might force themselves to have sex again after childbirth to see 'if their bits work'. This is not portrayed as an enjoyable act. There is very little written in parenting advice books or magazines about mothers enjoying their sexuality or about the ways in which their sexual desires and concerns might change after childbirth. For example, an analysis of American pregnancy and parenting magazines 1991 to 2011 (Shipps & Caron, 2013) suggested a very limited coverage of issues relating to sex in these magazines, with only 2.3% of articles analysed including content on sexual matters, and the majority of this coverage focusing on the topic of 'balancing children and a sex life', with little discussion of issues such as desire or sexual functioning. In addition, what coverage there was assumed that the reader was in a heterosexual marriage. This is also true of the clinical literature – Williamson (2008) points out that health professionals do not readily discuss the sexuality of pregnant or post-partum women and their partners beyond their choice of contraception. At the same time, the media still portrays women as responsible for the marital sexual relationship and also the monitoring of the sexuality of female children (Clarke, 2009; Trice-Black & Foster, 2011).

The concept of mothers having sex is problematic, both for wider society and indeed for mothers themselves. Trice-Black (2010) points out that societal definitions of sexuality within the context of motherhood can be particularly challenging. The Madonna/whore dichotomy gives the message that there should be a split between motherhood and sexuality – indeed that a highly sexual woman cannot be a good mother (Friedman, Weinberg, & Pines, 1998).

A woman who has been pregnant and given birth will have experienced changes in her body. She – and her partner – can no longer ignore its reproductive function. Breasts have a sexual function before childbirth, but after they have a nurturing and nourishing function (Trice-Black, 2010) – can they be sexy as well? At the same time, women are confronted by images in the media of the new supermom – 'a seamless, bloodless, stretch-mark-less version of pregnancy and childbirth', as Zeavin (2011, p. 59) has described her.

These issues can be difficult to discuss with either partners or best friends. In her study of mothers' perceptions of their sexuality, Trice-Black (2010) found that mothers reported discomfort in discussing sexual matters of a serious nature with other women. While media such as women's magazines offer some information about sexual matters, apart from letters pages this tends to be a one-way medium rather than discussion, and even letters pages do not allow the possibility of a conversation. In addition, as stated above, the information in women's magazines tends to be aimed at a more general audience and there is limited discussion of sex in parenting magazines.

Thus a lack of alternative sources may lead people to seek sex advice online (Boynton, 2007). In a Swedish study from 2012 Daneback et al. found that half of their respondents used the Internet to seek information about sexual issues, and that these users included men and women of all ages, suggesting that sex education remains a necessity in adult years. There are multi-modal learning modules and online diaries available on the subject as well as peer advice in online forums such as Mumsnet (Döring, 2008). However, such advice can be of variable quality and people can be exploited and misled by self-appointed sex advisors (Boynton, 2007). The internet offers anonymity and the possibility of discussing specific interests with others in the same situation as you, which may be liberating for many women. However, this may also be problematic for some users. Ferree (2003) warns that, because of stereotyping, women who have cybersex problems such as addiction may be overlooked by professionals. She suggests that women wishing to discuss sex online are more likely to be interested in relationship-oriented activity such as chat rooms rather than solitary activity related to pornography. However, in the US, Albright (2008) found that 41% of her female respondents had used the Internet to access pornography (in comparison to 75% of male respondents), but also found that her female respondents were more likely to report negative consequences of such viewing relating to issues such as body image.

Döring (2009) notes that the majority of research that has been undertaken into online sex has focused on its negative effects and that there has been limited research into its potential benefits. Researchers such as Attwood (2009), Muise (2011) and Wood (2008) have suggested that the internet offers a new place for women to explore their sexuality, for example, blogging about sex is heavily dominated by women. Muise (2011, p. 412) suggests that 'Online blogs are one place women can develop vocabularies of sexual desire, reduce shame around sex and build communities to share experiences and information'. Similarly, Frith (2013) argues that the Internet offers an alternative space for young women to discuss subjects that are not usually discussed in sex education, such as non-coital activities and female pleasure. On-line chat forums have also been used successfully in the treatment of female sexual dysfunctions, the anonymity of the Internet again enabling women to discuss their experiences freely (Hucker & McCabe, 2014). My own work on women's blogs also suggests that the Internet offers women the possibility of validation by others – of their experiences, their lives and their feelings (Pedersen, 2010). As far as sex is concerned, such validation is difficult to find elsewhere.

Methods

Parents, and in particular mothers, are a significant group of Internet users with a large volume of websites competing for their attention (Dworkin, Connell, & Doty, 2013; Plantin & Daneback, 2009). While the majority of online sites aimed at parents are provided by parenting experts, with limited possibilities for parents themselves to show their knowledge, there is a growing number of sites where parents can talk directly to parents and offer support and advice themselves, and a complementary body of research related to women's use of such communities (see for instance Brady & Guerin 2010; Chan 2008; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, 2011; Dunham, Hurshman, & Litwin 1998; Madge & O'Connor 2005, 2006; Miyata 2002; O'Connor & Madge 2004; Pedersen & Smithson 2010, 2013; Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005).

The aim of this article is to investigate the discussion of sex and sexuality undertaken by the users of one particular UK online parenting community, Mumsnet. It asks why there was such shock to find mothers discussing sexual matters online, what types of discussion related to sex can actually be found on Mumsnet and why women use Mumsnet to discuss these matters. Established in 2000 by a sports journalist and TV producer who met at antenatal classes, the stated aim of the site is 'To make parents' lives easier by pooling knowledge and experience'. The site has been described as an 'internet phenomenon' (*The Daily Telegraph*), 'a virtual shoulder to lean on' (*The Observer*) and the 'daddy' of all parenting sites (*The Times*).

Mumsnet has a particularly active discussion board, which attracted 4.2 million unique visitors monthly at December 2013.¹ Posters need to be registered with Mumsnet in order to start discussion threads on a subject of interest to them or to respond to threads started by others. However, the discussion board is public and can be read by both members and non-members. There are over 200 different topics under which a thread can be placed, ranging from obviously parenting-related topics such as antenatal tests, one-parent families and premature birth to wider issues such as feminism, bereavement and investments. Posters choose under which topic to place their thread. A search facility allows both members and non-members to search the discussion forum archives.

For this research project, and following the methods of Suzuki and Calzo (2004), who investigated discussions about sexuality on teen bulletin boards, the discussion board was searched for a four-month period to find all thread titles with the word 'sex' in the title. Threads that were not related to the project,

such as finding out your baby's sex before birth, were then discarded. 155 threads relating to sex and sexuality were found in this way and were copied into a Word document for analysis. No threads in this sample were written by men, although Mumsnet does style itself as 'By parents, for parents' and men make up 16% of all users of Mumsnet, although only 2-5% of core users. Of course, the discussions are all anonymous and online and so this does not preclude the possibility of a man posting as a woman, but all of the threads under discussion here were written from the female point of view and so the poster was self-identifying as female. It should also be acknowledged that searching only thread titles and only for the word 'sex' does not pick up all discussion threads about sexual matters. However, it does give a snapshot of the types of sexual subjects about which Mumsnetters start threads. A similar use of Mumsnet was undertaken by Hine (2012) in her analysis of online parenting discussions on the subject of headlice, while Holt (2011) also searched the archives of public online discussion boards for keywords relating to violence in her study of parental experiences of teenage violence. Following their example, and also the work of Skea, Entwistle, Watt, and Russell (2008), who analysed Mumsnet discussions relating to the MMR vaccination, this was a purely observational study with no attempt to contact posters or solicit additional personal detail for the purposes of the research.

Again following Suzuki and Calzo (2004), the 155 threads were then analysed thematically to ascertain the main topic of the opening post and categorised into one of nine categories. Following Hine (2012), this was a grounded coding process involving several passes through the data to identify a stable set of themes. The categories were: health-related queries; adult sex education; sex education for children; teenagers' sexuality; sex within relationships; professional sex workers; lack of sex drive for either male or female partners; and sex and consumption. This last category included subjects such as sex toys, pornography and lingerie and drew on Attwood's work on women's consumption of sexual commodities (Attwood, 2005). There are validity issues in the use of thematic analysis because what constitutes a theme is at the discretion of the researcher. However, the use of the literature as a starting-point for the identification of themes helped to validate the themes, increasing credibility.

The use of material from online discussion boards raises questions about ethics. Mumsnet is an open-access public forum, and users are advised of this fact. Users post under user names and not all choose to accept contact from others in the community so contacting each poster quoted for informed consent is not possible. Seale, Charteris-Black, MacFarlane, and McPherson (2010) argue that such messages are in the public domain and therefore informed consent for their use in academic research and publication is not necessary. The Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Committee (Markham, Buchanan, & AOIR Working Committee, 2012) recommends seeking the approval of the researcher's ethics review board, a procedure that has been undertaken. In addition, the owners and founders of Mumsnet are aware and supportive of the wider on-going research project on the site. Mumsnet has published several books using quotes from its discussion boards, and so posters understand that they may be quoted in a publication outside the forum with no further consent requested.

In addition, a review of academic literature on the subjects of mothers' sexuality; access to sex advice; the discussion of sex in media aimed at mothers and older women; and the depiction of mothers in the media and wider society was undertaken in order to answer the research question of why there was such a strong reaction to the revelation that women on Mumsnet discussed sexual matters. The results of this review have been outlined above.

Results

Figure 1 demonstrates the number of opening posts in each category.

As can be seen, the most popular category for opening posts was health-related. The majority of these posts were related to either post-partum sex or sex during pregnancy, and most indicated that such sex was problematic. Of 41 posts in this category, 28 were related to pain and bleeding during or after sex. Interestingly, given that Mumsnet is a parenting community, only 8 of the opening posts were related to conception. However, Mumsnet seems to be unusual amongst parenting communities in attracting older and more established parents – the Mumsnet census of 2009 found that only 11% of the respondents were pregnant and an overwhelming 82% stated that they would not be attempting to conceive again. Thus this dearth of posts relating to conception should be seen in the wider context of a discussion forum aimed at parents but not necessarily about getting pregnant (see Pedersen & Smithson, 2010, for more discussion on this subject).

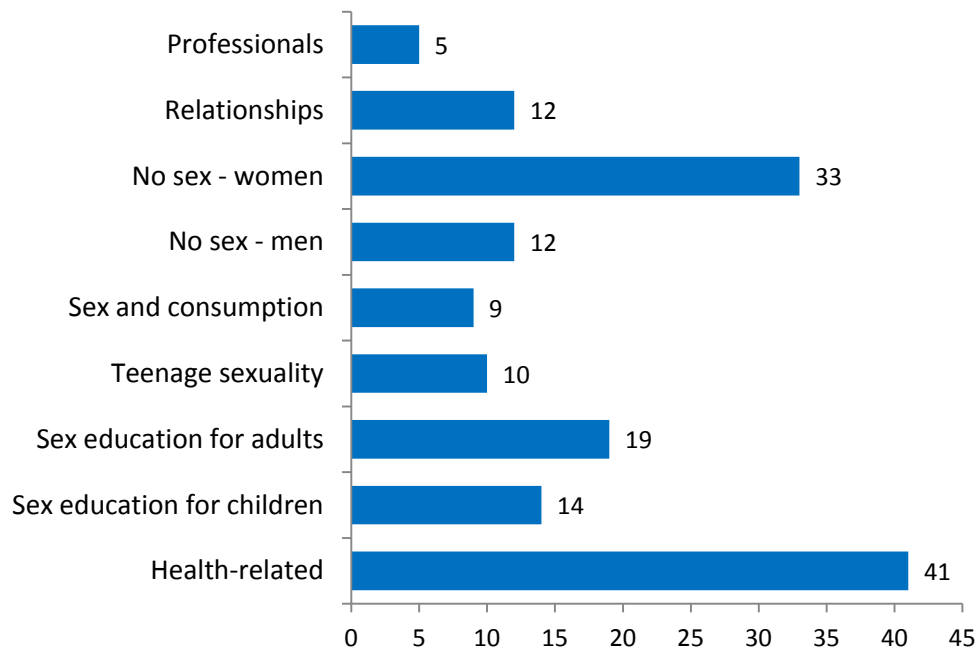


Figure 1: Categorisation of opening posts in threads related to the key-word 'sex'.

It is often stated in the literature that such parenting and more general medical communities are used to supplement rather than replace the advice of professionals (see Daneback & Plantin, 2008; and Dworkin et al., 2013 for a general review of the literature), and there is evidence of this in the Mumsnet discussions. For example, a pregnant poster who was worried about bleeding after sex assured readers, 'My midwife said she's coming to do my booking-in appointment on Sunday so I will ask her too, but I just wanted some opinions please'. However, there were also indications that Mumsnetters were seen as more knowledgeable on certain subjects, such as contraception after birth, than the professionals: 'I need some advice as doctor I saw today was useless.'; 'My doctor hardly knows anything about the Mirena coil and couldn't answer the questions that I wanted to ask', suggesting that Mumsnetters' own experience could prove just as valuable – if not more valuable – than the knowledge of medical professionals. There was also evidence that the anonymity of the Internet allowed posters to work through embarrassing issues online before facing someone in real life: 'Going to the gynaecologist on Tuesday for pelvic and vagina complaints. How do I word my difficulty to have sex doggy style after childbirth?' You don't find questions like that in *Mother and Baby* magazine.

What is useful to note about threads related to sexual health is their brevity. The average number of posts on such threads was only 7. In comparison, the average number of posts on threads relating to women's lack of sex drive was 32. Responses on the health-related threads tended to come from posters with similar experiences, plus recommendations to seek professional advice. In comparison, responses to other types of sex-related threads offered not just the poster's own experiences but their opinions. Advice on what the poster should do next was frequently contradicted by other posters, leading to longer discussions or even arguments. Thus threads on the subject of health problems relating to sex were the most frequent type of threads, but did not attract much discussion. Posters were assured that such subjects should, and most importantly could, be discussed with medical professionals. They therefore did not need to be debated on Mumsnet.

The next most frequent category of discussion threads related to dwindling or non-existent sex drives. Thirty-three opening posts related to women with this problem and another 12 threads were about a male partner's lack of interest. Women, particularly wives and mothers, are frequently stereotyped in popular culture as the ones less interested in sex while men are stereotyped as always up for it. This is also supported by the medical literature, for example, De Judicibus and McCabe (2002) found that women reported significant reductions in sexuality during pregnancy and postpartum. However, the fact that a third of the threads in this category featured women's complaints about their male partner's lack of interest in sex serves as a useful corrective. Bogren's 1991 study of sexuality during pregnancy found that both male and female partners might experience a declining interest in sex during pregnancy, although the decrease for women was usually related to the physiological and hormonal adjustments of pregnancy

while for men it might be related to a fear of harming the foetus. Several of the discussion threads on Mumsnet made a connection between the hormonal changes associated with breastfeeding and women's disinterest in sex. For example, one woman, who was still breastfeeding her 15-month-old toddler, explained that she *'forced'* herself to have sex with her husband once a fortnight, but he felt that this was not frequent enough. Responses to her post were mixed, with the majority of her respondents consoling her that this was just a stage but a large minority suggesting that, for the sake of her marriage, she might want to give up breastfeeding.

The periods of sexlessness given in these threads demonstrate that one person's feast might be another person's famine. One woman worried that she had not wanted sex that day. Another could not fancy sex more than a couple of times a week, complaining that her partner wanted it every day. One poster, who was suffering from bad morning sickness, reported her husband complaining that *'he didn't get sex yesterday, he was "very disappointed in me, and that had he known it'd be like this, he would simply not have got me pregnant"'*. However, others wrote of periods of several years without sex, with one particularly long and controversial thread of 531 posts posing the question: *'If a woman does not have sex with her husband for five years does he have the right to seek it elsewhere?'*

The vast majority of the discussion threads about a woman's lack of sex drive made the connection between the experiences of motherhood and the poster's lack of interest in sex. Either the physical changes to her body made sex difficult or painful or the resulting children made her too tired or without enough time for sex. Others blamed specific contraceptives such as implants. However, not all women who did not want sex blamed their motherhood for the situation. For a sizeable minority, the problem lay with their partners, who had let themselves go, made no attempt at foreplay or seduction or put too much pressure on them. As one woman stated in her opening post, *'My libido has reappeared – but I don't want sex with my husband'*.

If women blamed their hormones or their tiredness for a lack of interest in sex, what did they blame when it was their male partners who were not up for it? Some men also blamed the pregnancy and resulting changes in the woman's body for their loss of libido. Two threads reported that the poster had been informed by her husband that he did not fancy her now she was pregnant, while another had been told by her partner that he did not want to have sex with her now that she was a size 16. However, the majority of threads on the subject of male lack of interest did not seek an explanation for erectile dysfunction in the same way that the women who had lost their sex drive did. Instead, the women posting about their partner's lack of sex drive were more focused on practical solutions. They discussed the possibilities of therapy and medical intervention, although reported problems getting their partners to discuss their problems, either with themselves or with health professionals. This reluctance to discuss the matter away from the anonymity of a chatroom was also to be found in the threads of women who had no sex drive – several confessed that they *'went through the motions'* rather than tell their partners that they were not interested. The mothers in Trice-Black's (2010) study also reported placing the satisfaction of their husband's needs and desires before their own.

Of course, as the examples given above demonstrate, one of the issues related to a perceived lack of sex is the need to establish what is *normal* and to validate one's own experience as being within such a norm. The research of Fisher et al. (2010) into women's questions at sex-toy parties in the United States found that a common theme among such questions was the norms surrounding sexuality. This need to establish how (m)others like themselves experienced sex and to seek advice and support from those in similar situations came through very strongly in the Mumsnet posts. For example, one poster was trying to persuade her husband to go to talk to the doctor about his premature ejaculation. She stated *'He has said he will seek advice from the doctor but I've told him that I will ask you lot first and see what you suggest!'*

This is where we move to the other large category of threads, which I have termed adult sex education. These were the threads looking for further information or advice about the opening poster's own sex life. As Fisher et al. (2010) point out, little attention has been paid to adult sex education. Once someone has left school, there are few opportunities for formal sex education, despite the fact that one's sexuality will continue to change as one grows older – and in particular will be impacted by experiences such as pregnancy and parenthood.

The majority of opening posts in this category sought to establish *'the norm'*, in particular in relation to the length of time taken for sex – for example, *'I suppose I am interested in, ahem, [the] length of time it takes your partner'*. Other questions related to female orgasms, frequency of sex and size of penises. Several of the opening posts referred to a lack of experience – either because the poster had only had sex with one partner or because their previous experiences had not been good. For example, one poster who wished to ask about her new partner's behaviour in bed asked *'is this normal? I don't have any healthy*

relationship experience really, I don't know how to judge if someone is nice'. The 'penis beaker' thread should be seen in this context – an attempt to discover whether or not the behaviour of the poster's partner was 'normal'. Such questions agree with the findings of Fisher et al. (2010) that a common theme of women's discussion of sex with other women is the norms surrounding sexuality.

Some of the questions posed also suggested a real ignorance about sexual matters, particularly amongst a group of women who had given birth – *'ok so me and my sister were having a conversation about women coming we didnt know if women only came when they have an orgasm or can they come with out one ? im 31 i should know the answer'*.

The need to establish 'the norm' might also suggest that the opening posters on such threads had limited sexual experience and a small number of partners. One of the most frequently occurring subjects can be summed up as 'sex tips for women who have not had sex with anyone apart from their ex-partner for some years'. As one poster stated *'[I] feel a bit terrified as have not had sex with anyone new in 11 years. XH was always silent during sex – is that normal? Can anyone give me a few basic reminders?'* Another thread (entitled, 'Yup it's Friday so it's a sex question') explained *'I have bought underwear. I have waxed. I have bought new sheets (why? like he cares?). I think I look like a hogarthian gin whore and I've forgotten how to do it'*. This is the sort of sex advice that is missing elsewhere in the media. Women's magazines do offer sex advice, but tend to construct their reader as a young, up-for-it and comparatively experienced young woman, not a 45-year-old divorcee who hasn't had sex for years and is worried about saggy bits and caesarean scars, and again do not offer the mixture of bracing good sense and emotional support that this poster received (she returned the following morning, radiant, to announce that she had got the hang of it by the fourth go).

The reference to Friday in the thread title quoted above is part of an unspoken convention on the Mumsnet discussion boards that on Friday evenings the posters have had a glass or two of wine and are therefore 'up for' a discussion of subjects that, it is implied, they would not usually be able to countenance. Without such stimulus, it is implied, they would be too inhibited to discuss such subjects. For example, the thread title 'DH will not let me use a vibrator during sex. Sorry about this but it is Friday!' or comments in posts – *'It's Friday – is this going to be a bum sex thread?'* Amusingly, the most frequent mention of this apparently necessary stimulus tends to come in admissions that it is NOT Friday and yet the poster still needs to discuss sexual matters. Such an emphasis on the need for a particular day and particular circumstances for discussing sex reinforces wider societal assumptions about mother's and women's sexuality – that it can be compartmentalised and should only be aroused in the appropriate circumstances and after the application of alcohol – only drunk women want to talk about sex.

Discussion

While our society is now a very sexualised one, with few taboos left unbroken, one group remains mostly untouched – mothers. Not only does society have problems with seeing mothers as sexual beings, but they themselves have issues about how childbirth and parenting has impacted on their bodies and lives. While health professionals offer advice on contraception and encourage post-partum sex, there are few other resources available to mothers and middle-aged women to support them in exploring their sexualities. *Mother and Baby* magazine rarely discusses the possibilities of anal sex. Indeed, there are few formal opportunities for discussion about sex open to any adults once they have left school. The Internet, however, offers a place for the anonymous discussion of sexualities, the comparison of experiences with other mothers and validation of women's own experiences by establishment of a norm.

It may also be that Mumsnet, itself, is perceived by users as an appropriate venue for such discussion. As our wider project into the site has argued, the Mumsnet discussion forum is characterised by its difference to other mothering websites in its language use, its celebration of opinionated but well-informed debate, its tolerance of aggression and swearing and its focus on entertainment rather than support (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013). Thus it is not surprising to find frank discussion of sexual matters on the site. This also raises the question of norms. On Mumsnet there is a perceived dominance of cliques, supported by group membership norms and hierarchies, which include acceptable ways of posting and the requirement for a poster to deliver well-written, educated, entertainment at the same time as seeking advice – for example the reference to Hogarthian gin whores in the post cited above (Pedersen & Smithson, 2010). Thus the somewhat spirited discussion of sex on Mumsnet may be related to wider norms on this site, where posters pride themselves on their outspokenness. However, this may also mean that others are put off posting or adopt a particular tone in order to fit in with the prevailing attitude. Yun and Park (2011) suggest that people express their opinion in communities in line with what they perceive to be the climate of opinion and that, in such a spiral of silence, the minority opinion may become less and less visible. It

may be that posters on Mumsnet feel that they have to write their questions and comments about sex in a particular way in order to fit in with the wider community. This also impacts on the generalizability of these findings and more research into mothers' discussion of sex elsewhere on the Internet would be useful in order to investigate whether Mumsnet is as different as the media coverage of 'penis beaker gate' implied.

A post on the Mumsnet talk boards may be the first port of call to establish whether a health-related problem is serious enough to seek out a professional, but it also allows women to ask questions about their sexualities that they may be too embarrassed to discuss with others face to face. It also allows them to discuss the more problematic side of sexualities, whether that is the lack of a sex drive, not fancying your husband any more, erectile dysfunction or how to have sex doggy style while pregnant.

However, all this comes within a framework of certain assumptions and social norms. Posters conform to unspoken conventions in order to discuss sex – the idea that women have to have their inhibitions lowered by a glass of wine (never beer!) before they can talk about sex or admit to enjoying it. There is supposed to be a time and a place to discuss sex (Friday nights), even if there very obviously is not.

Nonetheless, Mumsnet offers a place where women can educate themselves about the sex practices of others and offers (mostly) non-judgemental support to those uncertain in their own sex lives – in particular women who may feel insecure about returning to an active sex life after some years on their own and in the face of the idealisation of the female form in the media. Discussion of the sex lives and problems of middle-aged women is rare in the mainstream media. Interactive and supportive discussion rarely still. Achievements are celebrated and disappointments commiserated with on Mumsnet. It provides an important (and most importantly interactive) forum for women to discuss and celebrate their sexuality

Notes

1. Statistics relating to Mumsnet given in personal correspondence with Mumsnet 9th December 2013.

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