

Motherhood on social media. Brazilian motherhood experiences shared online ¹

Motherhood on social media. Brazilian motherhood experiences shared online

Ana Luiza de Figueiredo Souza

Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, Brasil
analuzafigueiredosouza@id.uff.br

Abstract

Debates on motherhood have proliferated on social media, especially in Brazil. Through personal narratives, different women share their motherhood experiences online, creating support, negotiation, and conflict networks. The paper aims to study: which values are disputed through these narratives; in which ways does the use of social media make the problematization of motherhood visible; and how personal narratives integrate the dialogical environment of digital culture. The corpus consists of nine Brazilian posts— three on fanpages on Facebook, three on personal profiles on the same site, and three blogs about motherhood —along with their comments. The methodology applied relies on Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). Online discussions about motherhood disclose a potential of propagation, generated by participants' discursive performances.

Keywords: motherhood; personal narratives; motherhood experiences; social media; CMDA.

Resumen

Los debates sobre maternidad han aumentado en las redes sociales de internet, especialmente en Brasil. Por medio de narrativas personales, distintas mujeres comparten sus vivencias maternas en estos espacios, creando redes de apoyo, negociación y conflicto. El artículo explora los valores disputados a través de estas narrativas; la manera en que las redes sociales de internet hacen visibles las problemáticas de la maternidad; y cómo las narrativas personales se integran al ambiente dialógico de la cultura digital. El corpus está compuesto por nueve posts brasileños —tres en *fanpages* de Facebook, tres en perfiles personales del mismo sitio web y tres en blogs maternos —, con sus respectivos comentarios. En términos metodológicos, el artículo se apoya en el Análisis del Discurso Mediado por Computadora (ADMC). Las discusiones *online* sobre maternidad sugieren una potencial difusión del tema generada por las *performances* discursivas de las participantes.

Palabras clave: maternidad; narrativas personales; vivencias maternas; redes sociales de internet; ADCM.

1. Introduction

Debates on motherhood seen from a subjective perspective were not part of daily life for a large part of the female population until recently. In Brazil, the surge in personal accounts of motherhood has been seen throughout different media, especially social networks on the internet: online communication platforms that came about during the second phase of the Web 2.0, in which their participants create profiles and interact. These platforms are also called social networks for allowing modes of two (or more)-way communication and the dissemination of content between individuals (Lemos, 2002; Primo, 2007); distinguishing them from mass media.

Both the online social network Facebook and motherhood blogs constitute the main platforms on which women, mainly Brazilian women, currently address issues related to motherhood in cyberspace. Included in this dynamic are the mothers (more, less or un-) satisfied with children (from planned and unplanned pregnancies), and non-mothers (voluntary or involuntary). Beyond the Facebook pages/groups, blogs, sites, YouTube channels, online debate forums and Instagram profiles, these women also form part of a virtual landscape of debates on what is here understood as a broader concept of motherhood: the practices, conflicts, values as well as the cultural, social and political constructions surrounding it.

Most academic literature addresses motherhood as a symbolic institution whose ideology is fundamentally based on patriarchal culture. On one hand, the term mothering refers to the set of actions and experiences relative to the routine care with those considered as one's children.² However, it is necessary to think of motherhood and mothering as concepts that affect all women, in so far as they reflect or influence the treatment they are subject to. Finally, they are related with society as a whole, because both children and older non-mothers will have to use public spaces and services. Therefore, it is necessary to think about what images, demands and attributions linked to women who will or will not have children.

The term maternal experience refers to women's relationship with maternity, whether they have children or not. It is a set of values and ideologies related with motherhood that each woman acquires throughout her life through familial cohabitation, educational institutions, everyday social interaction, media productions and others. This set of maternalistic attributes helps establish the place that women reserve for motherhood within their own personal life plans and also, the way they collectively perceive maternity (Figueiredo Souza, 2019). Despite not having maternal experience, men can relate to maternal experience via the women with whom they live, including through personal narratives.

Escosteguy (2008) indicates that maternity constantly appears as an integral and often inseparable part of female identity. It is not about debating a supposed instinct that causes women to be mothers, but rather understanding sociocultural symbolic and technological structures that support (and question) determined maternal and mothering models. In the context of the Brazilian scenario, the article emphasizes the main role online social media play when mediating different discourses on motherhood and non-motherhood constructions, adding visibility to the discursive performances of women that are not celebrities or public figures.

This study aims to answer the following core question: What are the narratives on motherhood produced by non-celebrity women that appear on social media like blogs and Facebook, and what type of discussions on motherhood do they propose? The main objective is to study in what way women's personal narratives on these platforms expose the tensions and paradoxes surrounding motherhood. Then, nine posts on blogs and Facebook (where they are produced) and the respective comments following those posts (reception) demonstrating different aspects of motherhood are analyzed based on a Computer-mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Historical transformations in motherhood

Starting in the 16th century, masculine representatives from different sectors of colonial and metropolitan society, in conjunction with the Catholic Church from overseas, desired to build a maternal model that incorporated binding marriage, connubial stability and the valuation of the “legitimate family” (Del Priore, 2009). This led to the re-imagining of the Holy Mother (in Portuguese, *santa-mãezinha*), one who is modest, homebound, obedient, and preferably white and Catholic.

However, there were many women that did not meet the recently-created criteria, a large part of which needed to be absent from the domestic space for long periods in order to financially support themselves and/or those that relied on their work. If the slaves and indigenous are also considered in this situation, the number of Brazilian women that differ from the Holy Mother ideal is much larger than the number of women who embody it. Therefore, a religious and popular devotion began around those who managed to become mothers, reinforced, now in the 18th century, by the dissemination of the maternalistic ideology in the western Latin American imaginary.

In the 19th century, hygienist medicine contributed to the changes in physical, moral and sexual behavior of the bourgeois city-dweller family, focusing on defining the female-maternal role. Maternalistic discourse grew stronger, despite there being maternal and feminine practices that differed from it. Excluded from the hegemonic models were the poor, indigenous and black women.³ Among the wealthier classes, women transformed from the figure of the gentlewoman (placid, pale, giving orders in the home) to the hands-on mother. They were now responsible for the children’s education and wellbeing, allied with doctors in a process that, beyond protecting children, especially those of the elite, was centered on impeding women from subverting the patriarchal structures that favored men in the social space.

Throughout the 1910s, modernization adopted science as the main tool of authority, with doctors

positioned as the spokespeople and representatives. From this moment onward motherhood was an exercise based on scientific principles, where women were self-taught and supervised by doctors (Freire, 2009). Motherhood was considered a gift linked to the female anatomy and physiology—and, therefore, could not be denied—, one that could be perfected via hygiene education.

Ladies journals became important disseminators of propaganda for the hygienist agenda and maternalistic ideals, aimed at Brazilian women of the social elite and middle classes. Many women used the importance of motherhood as a social function to make sociopolitical and educative demands. This support of scientific motherhood segregated nonmothers and mothers alike who did not fit the hegemonic models.

In the 1960s and 1970s, this often caused women’s rights supporters to reject motherhood and the behaviors associated with it. Only in the 1980s did a search begin for new places in which to express femininity, even to the extent of elevating the value of women’s bodies. During this decade the subject of women’s health began to appear in the feminist Brazilian agenda. If motherhood was seen as a mark of the domain against which they struggled before, now

(...) feminists began to demand a specific and integral treatment of women’s health. In search of another vision, one less pathological, reproductive and interventionalist, health became one of those points of great feminist controversy and reform (Carneiro, 2011, p. 2).

As a movement and theory, national feminism began to expand on the topic of motherhood, bringing it more support and recognition. In the 1990s, feminist lines of thought focusing on the struggles facing different women debated on the construction of what was understood by feminine identity in an attempt to broaden hegemonic precepts that had supported that ideal until then. Under the influence of new feminist discourses, a discourse that challenged motherhood for its implied social relations, online social networks have become important platforms for discussing issues surrounding the concept.

2.1.1 Motherhood in the contemporary context

In Brazil, similar to Argentina and Chile, the issues championed in feminist movements have become part of political debate and institutional policy (Avelar & Blay, 2016). In terms of daily life, online social media are used to address issues related to violence and inequalities that women experience. While neighboring countries experienced the dissemination of #NiUnaMenos and #NiñasnoMadres campaigns on these platforms, in Brazil protests were led by feminist collectives such as #MeuPrimeiroAssédio, and other independent women's groups, unrelated to the latter, such as #MaternidadeReal.

The movement is about depicting motherhood on social media in a way that is open and realistic, without hiding feelings that differ from love and satisfaction. It also addresses the narratives of women who do not wish to be mothers, in effect denaturalizing motherhood. The intention is to identify oppressive aspects and breakdown secular discourse that considers the joys of motherhood are worth the suffering it entails.

In recent decades, stimulation has become more important than duty (Sibila, 2016), focusing on wants and desires that can be influenced by social constructions, many of them constant throughout time. The imaginary of dominance is also present, imposing an ideal of high performance that should be carried out individually via a meritocratic logic (Castellano, 2018). In addition, there is the development of communication technology that produces new media platforms and ways to interact. In this context, one can ask: What are the constants and dynamics in contemporary motherhood in regards to residual aspects of the traditional Brazilian concept of maternity?

Like Scavone (2004), Del Priore (2009) defends the idea that communion between the institutional desire to domesticate women into maternal roles and the use of feminine populations throughout the centuries was so successful, that the stereotype of the female provider —devout, dedicated and asexual Holy Mother— was engrained in the Brazilian imaginary during the colonial period and remains there to present day.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out how some of those aspects have shifted or morphed.

First, contemporary mother's guilt is different from the traditional maternal role. Until the mid-20th century, guilt was inherent to women desiring something that the public space condemned, when oppression formed part of social function. In today's society guilt is replaced by stimulus, promoting social desires and ideals like for example, that great modern-day mothers are present and adaptable multi-taskers. What mothers today call guilt can be interpreted as a frustration in regards to their failures and incompetence. The mechanism that incentivizes women in daily life is the stimulus, producer of desires. In order to bear or raise children, the mother sacrifices another desire, one that she desires less. However, one of the paradoxes lies in the sense of obligation —a social control capable of causing guilt in those who fail to comply with their responsibilities— which continues to maintain an important role, including within these desires.

Therefore, motherhood is a set of regulations that fit within the larger dimension of social norms. There are behaviors (on- and offline) that mothers are forced to carry out, some established by law, and if they do not they run the risk of being the object of public condemnation or losing custody of their children. The desire to become a mother goes hand in hand with many obligations that the woman may not necessarily be willing to assume. This regulatory aspect also extends to nonmothers. Certain attitudes constitute deviations from what is expected of them in terms of accepted behavior in the maternal/feminine universe; objects of censure, repression and disgust. Various reactions (censorship, rejection, anger) to practices contrary to the maternal code are repeated among mothers and nonmothers. The only difference is how they take are enacted, which depends on the condition of the woman under review.

Although motherhood has become less compulsive compared to previous years —especially in regards to mothering and the legitimized choice of not becoming a mother— choice (Giddens, 1991) is not the only factor that affects women's lives. In Brazil, legal decisions (such as making abortion illegal) and structural issues (institutionalized misogyny, high rates of sexual violence against women, a lack of public policies to support women or those focused on education and family planning) combine with moral pressures associated with motherhood.

od (among them, the pressure for women to have children and dedicate their lives to taking care of them) and high standards in performance that makes motherhood even more demanding and exhausting (Scavone, 2004; Mendonça, 2014; Figueiredo Souza 2020).

There is another paradox surrounding motherhood: despite the influence of esthetic pressures and cultural practices celebrating pleasure, maternal obligations are more important than regret or hedonism. These are the ambiguities of consumption-oriented culture that offers abundant and contradictory stimuli. Likewise, for mother or nonmother, one of these is, whether to enjoy the social security of following women's social code (to have a family, be a loving mother) or enjoy more freedom by making plans that don't involve having children. Contemporary society is marked by the conflict between taking the path governed by cultural/political impositions and one's personal desires; between finding one's own way and the intention to satisfy society's expectations. It is a gradual process that is also reflected in motherhood experiences and the way in which they are addressed on social media.

2.2. Personal narratives on motherhood in digital culture

Personal narratives function in different ways depending on the platforms and contexts in which they are produced. This article proposes studying personal narratives in digital culture, such as posts and comments —normally written in first person and fall into the realm of life experiences— that different women post in these spaces. Based on the perspective of San Cornelio (2017), we can add that personal narratives in the digital context incorporate social and conversational elements, that at the time which they occur, have the ability to create controversy, which is to say, in discussion, create conflict. In addition to text, there may be images, pictures, emojis, gifs and/or videos. This indicates the need to understand these personal manifestations in their material dimension.

There is also the notion that it is only possible to think about identity based on its relation with the

otherness. Interference by the other changes and creates these narratives, especially at a time when the line between what can and can't be shown is fuzzy. Therefore, the narratives are performances that can be considered as a way of organizing the world, both for those that produce them as well as those who receive them, including being capable of creating certain social capital.

Following this line of logic and based on the understanding of social media as a public space under constant surveillance, Orthon-Johnson (2017) argues that studies on what are called mummy blogs explore the forms in which blogs —online social networks— can provide consolation, support and social capital for mothers. As readers of these blogs, they use the *mamasphere* as a cultural arena via which maternal roles and identities, together with the mother-child relationship, are socially and digitally rebuilt.

Orthon-Johnson (2017) concludes that the digital landscape of motherhood can be both liberating and restrictive, becoming a space: a) for mothers to express/share frustrations and seek solidarity; b) for public condemnation and judgement; and c) for discussing ethical problems in the digital curatorship of family life, causing social contexts to collapse.

In addition to the above social media stimulates public discussion based on personal experiences, in which expressiveness is important in identifying the political/collective position of people in the debate (Van Zoonen, 2012). The more involved they are on certain issues and the more they consider those issues relevant, the more personalized the subject's discourses and attitudes on the issue will be. This creates connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) which is defined as the following: the online circulation of personal issues based on the negotiation of frameworks and identities, considering the relationships and the emotional connections when making decisions. As per that definition, personal narratives on motherhood can be understood as connective actions, given they are based on personal experiences and disputed identities, creating social relationships.

In this context the subject with inevitably gravitate toward opinions that align with theirs, discourses

that confirm what the very subject claims and/or believes in (Van Zoonen, 2012). However, thanks to a combination of push and pull models⁴ in the Web 2.0, online social media facilitate contact between the subject and what here we will refer to as dissonant voices: discourses that oppose the subject's statements, positions and, in this case, motherhood experiences.

Personal narratives on motherhood would therefore be discourses and stories built on a conjunction of motherhood experiences expressed by the author and the resources offered on the platforms where these narratives are posted. In online social media, text stands out as the most used tool when debating motherhood, women being the most participant in these discussions. Considering the latter, this article opts for working with personal narratives related to motherhood, written by women.

We argue that narratives focused on motherhood are emotional although intended to be effective. The writers of such narratives are generally moved (that is, affected) by certain issues referring to motherhood and/or by other narratives they have contact with, but they also aim to produce (and, often do produce) some effect in the real world based on their discursive performances. Considering what they write and how they write it, the authors of said stories are aware they are potentially communicating with thousands of people. They defend certain feminine and maternal models, in such a way that personal narratives on motherhood work both to express opinions and motivate (or impact) those who read them.

3. Methodology

First, we mapped discussions on motherhood on social media, starting with the network that observations indicated was the best in terms of research: Facebook. Using the "snowball" sampling technique, identifying informants that lead the researcher to other informants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983), the flow of derived associations (in Portuguese, *fluxo de associações derivativas*) also allows non-human actors to lead researchers to other actors that are also informants.

During our research we found that webpages used to discuss aspects of motherhood led to others offering the same proposal. These webpages were added to the sample as long as they fulfilled the following requirements: a) discussed an issue related to motherhood; b) had active users; c) had over ten thousand followers; d) was open to public participation, which is to say, that others could interact with the majority of the webpage posts; in those cases, examples with few followers would be considered. In order to study these features, we performed a brief exploratory study of the Home Page, About, and Post sections of each website. The **Figure 1** is a summary of how the method works.

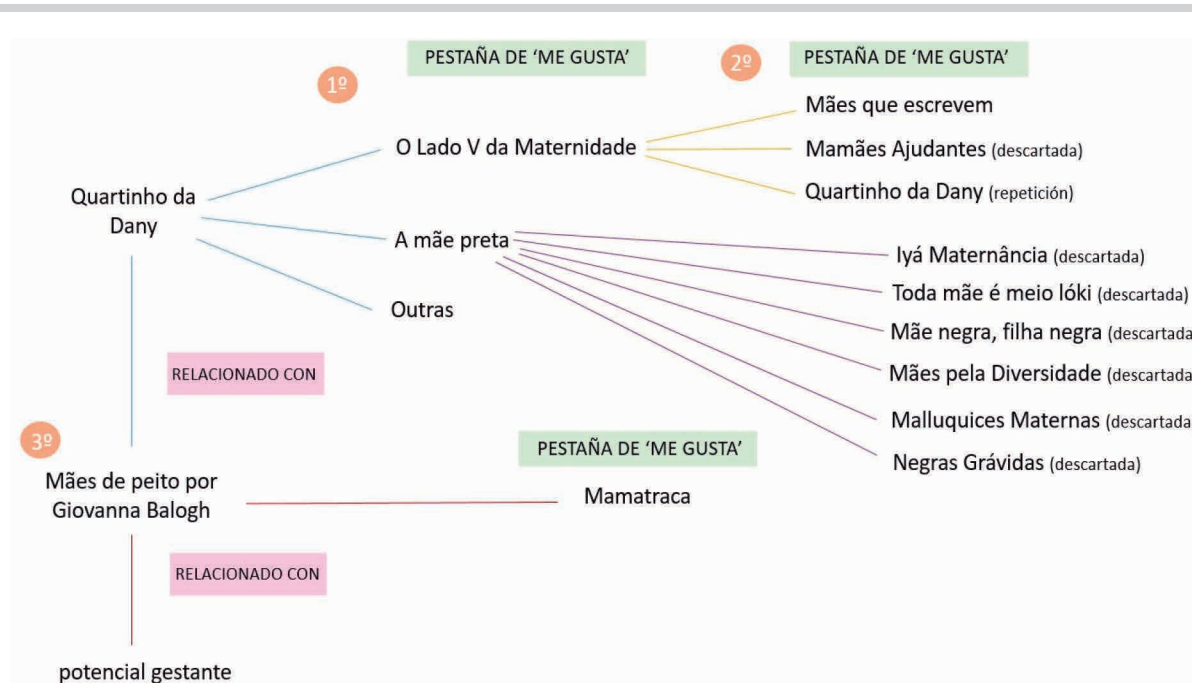
Based on the webpages and websites, blogs and other platforms identified in the study, we mapped the most important online social media for the debate on maternal issues in Brazil, in addition to the date they were created and the type of content posted. This mapping contributed to defining the work corpus, as shown in **Table 2**, consisting of three datasets related with the most frequent types of material found in the field. It is a representative map of the context surrounding the debate on motherhood, a context we monitored for three years. The visibility (number of reactions, comments and number of shares), audience engagement (interactions/responses to posts) and the date they were posted are also considered as selection criteria to define the units in our analysis. The study period was from 2016 to the second semester of 2018, time in which the previous research and the master's thesis on which this article is based were carried out; a time period in which both the production and the dissemination of posts discussing motherhood on online social media were notably higher than in other observed time periods up until the conclusion of this study.

To analyze the corpus, the research was succinctly inspired by the precepts of Herring's (2012) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA. This method proposes computer-mediated division of language into four levels (Structure, Meaning, Interaction Management, Social Phenomenon), and into three aspects: issues that arise; the phenomenon that will be analyzed; the method that can be used to study it. In this article, we are interested in specifically addressing the level of meaning and the level of social phenomenon.

The first is related to the expectations inherent to computer-mediated language, how they are communicated and what is the result of that communication. For this purpose, we observed the meaning of words, the action of voicing an opinion,

and semantic changes in meaning, paying special attention to the manifestations thereof and their practical effects. The level of social phenomenon is related to social dynamics, power relationships and concepts such as influence, identity, commu-

Figure 1: Flow of Derived Associations



Source: Own elaboration

Table 1: Corpus

Posts on Facebook fan pages	Posts on individual Facebook profiles	Posts on motherhood blogs
'We can only show motherhood as an experience of fulfillment and happiness, psychoanalytical critique' - HuffPost Brazil, 18 Sep. 2016	Challenge NOT accepted - Juliana Reis, 15 Feb. 2016	One day at a time - Life without children, Feb. 2013
"I regret being a mother" - BBC News Brazil, 09 Dec. 2016	Motherhood Spoiler Alert - Julia Rocha, 19 Oct. 2017	Being a mother is not enough for me - Bossa Mãe, 23 Oct. 2017
Women Without Children - Quartinho da Dany, 08 Jul. 2017	I'm turning 38 soon. I don't have children - Fhoutine Marie, 6 Feb. 2018	Don't read my blog if you are looking for a reason not to have children - Tudo Sobre Minha Mãe, 27 May 2014

Source: Own elaboration

nity and cultural/social differences. Therefore, we must consider the linguistic expressions that denote status, conflict, negotiation and impression, as well as observe the style and particularities of the studied discourse.

In order to study the units of the corpus analysis, we first worked on the production axis. Afterwards, we reviewed the main comments (containing personal narratives) in the post being analyzed, carrying out a brief analysis of the authors based on the information available on their profiles. **Screenshot 1** is an example of the analysis of the selected and most important comments. The reactions⁵ that each one of these received were also factored in the analysis to interpret audience reception.

It's important to mention that the posts were public, making it possible to carry out a scientific

discussion without having to request authorization from the authors.

4. Results of Empirical Analysis

In the analyzed online discussion, the 'edit post' function is heavily used to correct typo errors and add arguments, suggesting that the debates were carried out simultaneously, without participants taking much time to reflect on what they were writing. Such action provides for more spontaneous and emotional narratives. Nevertheless, authors use the comments to perfect or correct their arguments. This editing reveals that the authors follow and continue to engage in the debates and also defend themselves based on the written reactions.

Screenshot 1: Analytical Layout

The screenshot shows a social media post by Fhoutine Marie, dated February 6, 2018. The post discusses her experience as a woman without children and her views on motherhood. Below the post are three comments from other users, each with its own set of reactions (likes, replies, and emojis).

Fhoutine Marie
6 de fevereiro de 2018

Em breve eu vou completar 38 anos. Eu não tenho filho. Melhor dizendo, eu sou uma mulher cis hétero em um relacionamento longo e com o aparelho reprodutor saudável que não tem filho. Ou seja, eu não tive filho porque o momento de tomar a decisão de colocar uma pessoa no mundo não chegou. Ou melhor, eu não tive filho porque eu não quis.

Antes que alguém diga que ainda dá tempo, eu respondo que sei como funciona o meu corpo e que ainda não entrei na menopausa. Eu sei que tem tempo. Tem tempo, tem corpo funcionando bem pra essa finalidade, tem marido bacana. O que não tem: vontade da minha parte.

Antes que alguém me diga "mas é tão bom", eu respondo que não duvido. As pessoas da minha idade estão grávidas, tem filhos pequenos, adolescentes, entrando na faculdade ou mais de uma categoria. Eu vejo a alegria dos meus amigos que tem filho, mas não é pra mim. Eu não odeio criança, ao contrário, eu me dou muito bem com crianças. Eu não gosto muito de adolescente, mas até aí nem pai e mãe de adolescente gosta muito de adolescente.

A questão é que eu não tenho a menor vontade de ficar grávida ou de cuidar de uma criança todos os dias da minha vida e pelos próximos anos. Isso não quer dizer que eu seja uma dessas childfree que não quer conviver com crianças. Na minha idade é inevitável porque a maioria das pessoas tem filho. Crianças são pessoas como quaisquer outras, só possuem uma lógica diferente. Com a vantagem de serem mais legais e bonitinhas que a maioria das pessoas.

Como mulher cis que optou por não ter filhos eu penso todos os dias no privilégio que é poder não ter filhos num país que nos obriga a levar adiante uma gestação que você não quer. Ou é isso ou se encher de hormônio pra garantir. Eu me encho de hormônio. Eu penso também no quanto me perturba as pessoas que me cobram filhos e imagino o quanto de perturbação as mães aturam porque estão cansadas ou solitárias demais pra mandar todo mundo pro inferno.

Enfim, eu estou escrevendo isso porque eu sinto que precisamos falar disto com mais honestidade. Maternidade compulsória, solidão materna e não-maternidade. Porque o patriarcado tá pra nos tratar como encubadoras e pra tratar que se recusa a ser mãe como mulheres menores, defeituosas, egoístas e pra dizer pras que são mães "virem-se, quem pariu Matheus que o embale".

3,5 mil

51 comentários 707 compartilhamentos

Dani Amiga, eu tenho a Clarice e estou feliz com ela. Mas desde que me assumi com um companheiro mara e 13 anos mais novo que todo mundo pergunta: "mas e um filho de vcs 2?". Já teve até quem dissesse que seria injusto com ele eu não ter outro filho. E comigo? Tem justiça pra mãe? Pois é...
A verdade é que sempre tem que nos julgue pq sempre esperam mais e mais de nós.
Permanecemos felizes como somos e tranquilas em nossas escolhas. Isso é justiça.

33

Curtir · 16 sem

Heloisa Filho tem que ser escolhal! Não tá afim, não tenha mesmo! Tá certíssima! A vida é sua, e quando a gente tem filho, a vida muda muito.

62

Curtir · 16 sem

lalandalu Eu acho que as pessoas localizam muito a maternidade na criança e não no fato de que maternidade se trata de um papel social imposto as mulheres. Ser mãe se trata muito mais de controle social do que a experiência em si. E não sobre gostar ou querer ter crianças por perto. Até pq, tanto a infância quanto a adolescência, comparada com a fase adulta é uma parte bem pequena da vida de qualquer indivíduo. E maternidade ultrapassa a dimensão do choro e do acordar cedo. Acho que temos que nos perguntar: afinal, o que é ser mãe? E por que somos mães? E para quê ou quem?

33

Curtir · 15 sem

It seems unlikely that in the observed discussions there would be debate on motherhood without interaction between mothers and nonmothers. The research also found common ground among narratives based on personal experiences. There are discursive axes present in the majority of comments made by mothers (love for one's children) while other axes are the majority among comments by nonmothers (feeling incomplete). It is also possible to find elements and situations that repeat in both narratives (familial pressure to have children); examples of practices and conceptions that affect both groups and therefore, affect all women.

One of the most popular discursive axes are the obligations and regrets of being a mother, in which mothers report maternal exhaustion: "Lack of sleep, a ruining of their physiques, loss of freedom and independence, absence or romance". The narratives on the challenges of motherhood can be associated with an image of victory—a day in the life of a champion that overcomes obstacles and tolerates difficulties in order to accomplish objectives, following merit-based logic (Castellano, 2018): "I am at the level of what people conceive as a 'super mom'. I get up really early, I make coffee, [my children] are always clean and nice smelling, I help with homework, I work 12 hours a day". These narratives report that the criteria to be considered a good mother are demanding, in line with effects considered positive for liberal capitalism (Mendonça, 2014).

Another strong axis is that of personal experience. Many narratives reveal distrust of information disseminated by media agents like television programs and blogs/information groups, leading to connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) informing other mothers on what is considered true motherhood, based on their own narratives: "Real motherhood is not what they show on soap operas, it is what mothers experience". However, personal maternal experiences have a certain degree of mediation, given that they are also based on stories and experiences of other women on motherhood. The posts that debaters praise and share were published using mediatic devices, and praised in turn by the authors themselves.

In this context, support networks form among women whose voices are seemingly aligned. The discussions are much more self-affirming, where

participants vent and in so doing create awareness or clarify the argument: "Well I am a great-grandmother, I had four children and I can tell you, you are an idealist, I hope you will become a mother soon, so that you have room to talk. For now, close your mouth". This even reveals the limits of the discourse of sisterhood—an alliance among women based on empathy, of current feminist movements. The sisterhood only exists among women who have similar stances. The right to speak becomes a resource to discredit or argue against different motherhood experiences in order to criticize arguments or dissonant voices. In this sense, the digital world of motherhood becomes a space where mothers either find solidarity in regards to what they post (aligned voices) or an arena where they are publicly judged on what they express (dissonant voices), similar to that proposed by Orthon-Johnson (2017).

Visibility is important for women posting certain narratives: "I'm a mother, motherhood is hell, I would like more people to know that before they judge". We find a characteristic of contemporary subjects in digital media (Sibilia, 2016): demonstrating that their feelings and experiences are real, they happen, despite not having a special place in media or in the collective imaginary. The performative intentionality of the participants from a majority of the debates seems to be more related to being recognized by people of their same point of view than that of convincing—or making their argument understood—those who have an opposite standpoint. Each one leaves a record of their maternal experience that will win a "like" and reactions like "love" by those who agree with the argument, and a "Haha" or an "Angry" by those who disagree.

This argumentative dynamic reveals how social media is mainly a source for confirmation or reaffirmation, instead of being spaces for objection, in accordance with that stated by Van Zoonen (2012). The emotional tone of the content that seeks to be effective is reflected in the polarization, aggressiveness of the debate, and in a binary feature that delineates the stance of the user making the comment.

The value of authentic motherhood experience is another important aspect among these narratives, whether it be situations faced by mothers and nonmothers, or knowledge of the aspects of mother-

hood or non-motherhood: "Speaking as someone who neither has nor wants children, I know a lot of people think we are monsters". In the narratives, standpoint is fundamental. Based on their particular standpoints and their own motherhood experience, participant discussion interweaves stories and their assessment of the content of other comments. Despite this, the narrative standpoint is not a determining factor in approving or rejecting the narratives they share. Frequently, who is talking is not as important as what they are saying, reinforcing the dynamic of aligned voices and the performative negotiation present in these online interactions. But if someone, outside of the group to which one of the participants belongs, expresses a discourse that causes disagreement with what she or her group defends, the inadequacy of the external standpoint and of the content of the argument are rejected more aggressively: "Here comes the mother talking shit about those who aren't".

Another axis is the predominant valuations on motherhood "We raise our children for competition, a capitalist race that begins when the baby is still in the womb"; "A child is no excuse not to work or study"; "I love my children, I do everything for them, it is hard, by my love only grows"; "I am sure I was born to be a mother, my life only had meaning once my children arrived." In the maternal models described in these posts, one observes the influence of traditional conceptions (Del Priore, 2009; Costa, 1999; Freire, 2009) combined with demands for optimization (Mendonça, 2014; Sibilia, 2016; Castellano, 2018), responding to new demands and definitions that are largely caused by the market.

The last of the most important axis is the paradox of motherhood, the contradictions that are part of motherhood: "A combination of happiness, sadness and guilt". According to what is presented here, perhaps the greatest paradox is that despite being as demanding and exhausting as it is within a patriarchal culture, it constitutes a safer, more predictable route in socio-cultural terms, one in which women have references (family members, social references, media references) from a very young age. It is an endeavor that a large part of women believe gives them importance and social status, as observed in some of the personal narratives posted online: "I only began to be treated as an adult once I had my daughter. Therefore, despite how exhausting it is, I believe I am part of some-

thing bigger". On the contrary, motherhood ends up being a social experience and, above all, personally gratifying for the majority of Brazilian women that critique it on online media.

5. Conclusions

There were never laws that obligated women to be mothers in colonial times in Brazil. What did exist was social pressure, linked to internalizing the moral duty of being mother. Women only reached certain access to rights and public recognition if they had children. Motherhood continues to be a way in which many Brazilian women acquire recognition in their respective environments, especially in the poorest communities (Scavone, 2004). However, in present-day Brazil, legislation forces women to be mothers by outlawing abortion. Despite large protests taking place in favor of the legalization of abortion, not only in Brazil but also in Chile and Argentina, it was not enough to change current law.

Feminist collectives and initiatives have successfully taken advantage of online platforms, harnessing their power to distribute information and convene and rally women to protest against oppressive state-led intervention. However, in Brazil, online discussions related to gender inequality tend to focus more on individual needs, especially when it comes to debates on motherhood on social media. Although feminist movements on the internet certainly influence the exchange of narratives that discuss motherhood, the participants in these discussions generally do not involve feminist groups. Many of them do not recognize themselves as such. They aim more at solutions on a personal level (how not to judge mothers or those who do not want children) than political measures. Nevertheless, they recognize the existence of structures that make the feminine experience — and, by association, that related to motherhood — even more difficult.

Within a misogynistic context, it is likely that a large number of Brazilian women have been victim to some form of bodily harm or abuse of their right of choice, in addition to the public authorities' frequent abuse of women's reproductive rights. Therefore, there is an increasing urgency for women

to be able to decide whether or not to become mothers, where the decision arises from a personal preference and is not the result of an imposition or loss of freedoms. Once the general public is aware of the hostility that exists in Brazil in relation to women, people will better understand the emphatic and emotional character of the personal narratives that they give on motherhood on social media — platforms that have now been a part of daily life for a long time. We can consider these imperatives as ways of defending the possibility to make decisions without the influence of oppressive structures.

The structure in which maternal experiences are generally relayed has been destabilized, perhaps even brought down, by online narratives, personal experience put up on social media and the fierce defense of those positions by the women who posted them. As noted by Orthon-Johnson (2017), in an

environment rife with conflict and contrary opinion, the comment section of these posts become spaces where women could vent, complain and search for support among women with similar positions.

Beyond being or not being mothers, women seek (the power) to define the course of their own position on motherhood based on the specific nature of their own personal circumstances. As it is there is no other option except to choose (Giddens, 1991), and it is necessary that these choices be coherent with women's personal beliefs, that decisions be made more freely and in accordance with individual needs, independent of the norms inherent to current social and legislative models governing maternity. The demands being made are now given greater reach to new and different audiences, cultivating awareness and exchange of experiences through discursive performance on social media platforms.

Notes

1. This article summarizes the main results of the master's degree thesis written by the author between 2017 and 2019 in the Communication Postgraduate Program (Programa de Posgrado em Comunicação or PPGCOM) of Universidade Federal Fluminense, nominated for the Masters and Doctorate Thesis Composition Award 2020.
2. The term mothering is used in areas such as psychology to refer to childcare carried out by mothers or other guardians. Mothering is a term composed by combining the verb to mother with the suffix -ing, which indicates action and continuous process, for which Mendonça (2014, p. 26) chose the word *maternagem* as its translation in Portuguese. Here, the Latin suffix -agem expresses action or resulting from action. Given the author's reasoning and Spanish also being a Latin language, in this article the researchers use the term mothering for the Spanish term *maternaje*.
3. They often became wet nurses. In the late 19th century the service was regulated in major provinces. They could only practice it after a medical exam that certified their health. With the arrival of manufactured foods for child nutrition, the Lei Aurea ("Golden Law" that abolished slavery) and the different urban reforms that affected the poorest populations, the role of the wet nurse declined, although it continued to exist even after the 1930s.
4. According to Primo (2007), when social actors come into contact and relate to each other through content and users that search for similar minded people, they are also exposed to propaganda, suggestions and, as we see in this article, narratives that they did not expect to find on online social media that they themselves have inadvertently promoted.
5. This function appeared on Facebook in February 2016. In addition to the traditional "Like", users can interact with posts with others like "Love" (heart-shaped icon), "Haha" (laughing emoji), "Wow" (surprise emoji), "Sad" (crying emoji), "Angry" (frowning emoji).

References

- Avelar, L. & Blay, E. A. (Orgs.). (2016). *50 Anos de Feminismo: Argentina, Brasil e Chile. A Construção das Mulheres como Atores Políticos e Democráticos*. São Paulo: Edusp.
- Bennett, W. L. & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739-768. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661
- Carneiro, R. (2011, julho). Feminismos e Maternidades: (des)encontros e (re)significados. Subjetividades Maternas e Feministas em Questão. Trabalho apresentado em XXVI Simpósio Nacional de História, São Paulo.
- Castellano, M. (2018). *Vencedores e Fracassados: O Imperativo do Sucesso na Cultura da Autoajuda*. Curitiba: Appris.
- Costa, J. F. (1999). *Ordem médica e norma familiar*. Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal.
- Del Priore, M. (2009). Ao sul do corpo: *Condição feminina, maternidades e mentalidades no Brasil Colônia*. 2. ed. São Paulo: Unesp.
- Escosteguy, A. C. D. (Org.). (2008). *Comunicação e gênero: a aventura da pesquisa*. Porto Alegre: EdIPUCRS.
- Figueiredo Souza, A. L. (28 abril, 2020). Maternidade no Brasil – Uma escolha? *Cientistas Feministas*. Recuperado de <https://bit.ly/3h1Ejwa>
- Figueiredo Souza, A. L. (2019). *“Me deixem decidir se quero ou não ser mãe!”: narrativas pessoais de mulheres sobre a maternidade nas mídias sociais*. (Tesis de maestría, Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, Brasil). Recuperada de <https://bit.ly/2MWxu1n>
- Freire, M. M. L. (2009). *Mulheres, mães e médicos: discurso maternalista no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. London: Tavistock.
- Herring, S. C. (2012). Discourse on Web 2.0: Familiar, reconfigured, and emergent. En: Tannen, D.; Trester, A.M. (Eds.). *Discourse 2.0: Language and new media* (pp. 16-41). Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Lemos, A. (2002). *Cibercultura, tecnologia e vida social na sociedade contemporânea*. Porto Alegre: Sulina.
- Mendonça, M. C. (2014). *A maternidade na publicidade: Uma análise qualitativa e semiótica em São Paulo e Toronto*. (Tesis de doctorado, Pontifícia Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brasil). Recuperada de <https://bit.ly/3bypLko>
- Orton-Johnson, K. (2017). Mummy Blogs and Representations of Motherhood: “Bad Mummies” and Their Readers. *Social Media + Society*, 3(2), 1-10, apr./jun. doi: 10.1177%2F2056305117707186
- Primo, A. (2007). O aspecto relacional das interações na Web 2.0. *E-Compós*, 9 (ago.), sin paginación. doi: 10.30962/ec.v9i0.153

- San Cornelio, G. (2017). Visiones contemporáneas de la maternidad en Instagram: una aproximación mixta al estudio del selfie como narrativa personal. *Rizoma*, 5(2), 26-41. doi: 10.1177/256305117707186
- Scavone, L. (2004). "Dar a vida e cuidar da vida: sobre maternidade e saúde". En: Scavone, L. (Ed.). *Dar a vida e cuidar da vida: feminismo e ciências sociais*. (pp. 127-139). São Paulo: Unesp.
- Sibilia, P. (2016). *O show do eu: A intimidade como espetáculo*. 2. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto.
- Van Zoonen, L. (2012). I-Pistemology: changing truth claims in popular and political culture. *European Journal of Communication*, 27(1), 56-67. doi: 10.1177/0267323112438808

- About the Author:

Ana Luiza de Figueiredo Souza has a master's and doctor's degree from the Post-Graduate Program of the Federal Fluminense University (PPGCOM UFF). She has an undergraduate degree in Social Communication -Advertising and Propaganda from Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ); is the Review Coordinator for the academic journal *Contracampo*, member of the MiDiCom research team, collaborator and editor for the Feminist Scientists (Cientistas Feministas) project, and an author.

- How to cite this article:

Figueiredo Souza, A. L. (2020). Motherhood on social media. Brazilian motherhood experiences shared online. *Comunicación y Medios*, (41), 54-66, doi: 10.5354/0719-1529.2020.54499