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Romanian Parents' Use of the Internet: Optimizing Parenting Skills as Sexual Educators

Meda V. Pop^{a*}, Alina S. Rusu^b

* Corresponding author: Meda V. Pop, medaveronica@yahoo.com

^aBabes-Bolyai University, Sindicatelor nr. 7, 400015, Cluj-Napoca, Cluj, Romania, medavpop@gmail.com

^bBabes-Bolyai University, Sindicatelor nr. 7, 400015, Cluj-Napoca, Cluj, Romania, alina.rusu@ubbcluj.ro

Abstract

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There is a growing trend for parents to use the Internet and social media aiming to obtain parenting information and support. We present here an on-line exploration of the beliefs, concerns and needs that Romanian parents express regarding the sexual development and health of their children. Thematic analysis of discussions from social media and internet asynchronous discussion boards (two forums and one Facebook parenting group) is performed. In line with the existent literature, our preliminary data indicate that the major themes of parental discourse in Romania are information and advice seeking, experience and advice sharing and social support seeking. With respect to sexual health and education of children and young people, parents in Romania usually express the following themes in their online interactions with other parents: sex education significance; sexual development and sexual behaviour of children and young people; parenting sexually developing children and young people. It seems that parents do benefit from the social media interactions to a certain extent, especially by creating online support communities and accessing a considerable and diverse amount of information, but there are also concerns about the reliability of the information thus exchanged.

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1. Introduction

Parents and caregivers are constantly concerned with the well-being of the children they are responsible for and they manifest this concern in various ways and through various means. Besides the everyday direct social interactions the Internet is a medium that allows individuals to express their

parental needs and to search for information, resources and support to help them address those needs (Dworkin, Connell & Doty, 2013). The number of people having access to and using the Internet worldwide (via computers or mobile devices) is of billions and is continuously growing (Capurro et al., 2014), although there is still present a “digital divide” (Hargittai, 2003).

There is a growing trend for people to use the Internet for various health-related and/or parenting activities (Korda & Itani, 2013; Dworkin, Connell & Doty, 2013). The last two decades have brought an increase in the quantity and quality of the online educational information and resources, as well as of the websites and applications parents can access to interact with other parents or to obtain help and support from health professionals (Capurro et al., 2014; Clarke & Van Ameron, 2015). As a consequence, a number of studies have lately started to explore the dimensions of the benefits and costs that the Internet and online activity and interactions hold for those directly and indirectly involved in them (for review see, Pendry & Salvatore, 2015).

There are numerous websites, blogs and groups dedicated to parenting and to children’s development and health while other sites are allocating them considerable sections. These are frequently accessed by parents, especially mothers, who are using the Internet in a higher percentage than non-parents (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe & Ellison, 2015). These blogs, websites and social networking sites (SNSs, or social media) may either only offer information and share resources or, in many cases, they may offer interaction opportunities for members or for the general public. Some of the sites and blogs are created by health professionals (e.g., e-Health platforms) or are enlisting professional help while others are not. As a result, although not developed particularly for that purpose, especially in the case of social media, these SNSs (e.g., Facebook, YouTube) end up sharing health-related information that is sometimes not scientifically validated and incomplete or inaccurate (McRee, Reiter & Brewer, 2011; Ventola, 2014).

A significant number of this type of Internet mediums are entirely or partially dedicated to helping parents improve the sexual health of young people (e.g., government sponsored websites, non-governmental organizations’ websites and professional or amateur blogs). Besides other more traditional means parents are nowadays using these relatively recently available resources to help them improve the skills necessary for raising sexually healthy young people. The exact number of available online mediums and the extent to which parents use these specific mediums is difficult to establish.

Parents’ contribution to the healthy sexual development of their children, as part of their general well-being, is well documented by literature and numerous programs that aim to help parents in their efforts as sexual educators exist (DiIorio, Pluhar & Belcher, 2003; Wight & Fullerton, 2013). Parents are preoccupied with what, when and how to communicate and to behave with their children regarding sexual topics (Dyson & Smith, 2012; Fisher et al., 2015). Researchers and parents themselves have identified a number of barriers that they perceive are making these tasks more difficult, such as parental values and beliefs, negative expectations regarding the outcomes, low self-efficacy, lack of specific knowledge and resources, parents’ perception that their children are too young and too innocent for sex education and not knowing how and when to talk to them, parent’s gender and child’s gender, parent’s embarrassment and fear of judgement or criticism from others etc. (Walker, 2004; Wilson, Dalberth, Koo & Gard, 2010; Stone, Ingham & Gibbins, 2013). However, only a few studies exist regarding the

use of social media and of asynchronous discussions boards (or discussion forums) by parents seeking information regarding their children's health in general or on specific topics (e.g., pregnancy, early parenting, childhood obesity, mental health, congenital heart diseases and other chronic health conditions) (Appleton, Fowler & Brown, 2014; Bussing, Gary, Mills & Garvan, 2007; Goldman & Macpherson, 2006; Bouche & Migeot, 2008).

Our systematic search for published studies investigating parents' use social media for sexual-health-and-education-related information and parenting support returned no results, either for parents in Romania or in other countries. Still, the available data about Romania is indicating that there are a significant number of online resources dedicated to parenting (in Romanian) and an increasing number of Internet and social media users, with over 8 million Facebook users and with over 10 000 active blogs out of approx. 90 000 in March, 2016 (source: www.zelist.ro).

The few existing studies investigating the use of social media and asynchronous online discussion boards by parents seeking child-health information and support are pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of these mediums use for parents. Online discussions forums are a feature of many parenting websites that are able to connect a larger number of "users" (compare to off-line interactions), who could potentially offer encouragement, insight and support with specific issues. Also, they connect a diversity of people from remote locations but with similar particular interests and needs, mostly under a condition of anonymity (only partially true in Facebook's case), which facilitates sharing of personal experience without fear of judgement or stigma. This aspect is of special relevance in the case of sexual-health-related discussions given the sensitive nature of the topic which is still a taboo in some contexts. Other positive aspects of people using these forums and social media are: the possibility of accessing, when available, professional support and advice and of contributing to a conversation or receiving an answer at any time, the possibility of helping people learn new skills and the fact that they could produce not only individual but societal benefits such as increased involvement in off-line civic activities. There are also negative aspects, such as the lack of credibility and trustworthiness of the information, the possible proliferation of inaccurate and poor-quality information that might have harmful consequences and the risk of exposing people to negative interactions with other users (Appleton, Fowler & Brown, 2014; Dworkin, Connell & Doty, 2013; Nieuwboer, Fukkink & Hermanns, 2013; Pendry & Salvatore, 2015).

Usually, but not always, parents use the Internet to find information on parenting and child health in addition to the information they have already obtained from professionals in off-line settings (Dworkin, Connell & Doty, 2013). The majority of parents in one study described their experience of using these mediums in terms of being helpful or very helpful (Goldman & Macpherson, 2006). In another study, parents thought the Internet and social media were generally supportive, contributed to the normalization of their experiences, allowed them to feel useful for others and helped them feel less confused about certain issues (Appleton, Fowler & Brown, 2014). Though, some studies revealed that a significant amount of the parents' experience with these mediums was not so positive and they identified high levels of criticism, judgement, inappropriate or aggressive language and even harassment in the interactions (Appleton, Fowler & Brown, 2014; Dworkin, Connell & Doty, 2013).

Three major themes of parental discourse around child-health and Internet usage were identified by literature: (1) seeking information and advice, (2) sharing information and experience and (3) seeking and creating social support (Appleton, Fowler & Brown, 2014; Dworkin, Connell & Doty, 2013).

The present study aims to contribute to the gap in the knowledge about the needs, beliefs and practices of parents regarding the sexual health and education of their children by identifying these as they appear from parents' discussions on two Romanian-based discussion forums and one Facebook parenting-themed group. This paper describes preliminary partial findings of this exploratory study, the results of a thematic analysis performed on a data set collected from one of the online discussion forums mentioned above.

2. Method

Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method that is widely used in psychological research (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and has been previously used in studies evaluating various parental discourses (Arden, Duxbury & Soltani, 2014) and parental beliefs, expectations and practices regarding the sexual health and education of children as described by parents (Stone, Ingham & Gibbins, 2013). Semantic thematic analysis was chosen for this study because of its flexibility and compatibility with this type of data and because it is well-suited for identifying and reporting patterns or themes across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes or patterns of meaning were searched for across the data set, constituted only of the post of parents on several sexual health issues and parenting discussion threads from the same online forum (the analysis of the rest of the data corpus is still in process).

This site was identified as being one of the most popular parenting websites in Romania, which claims to be the biggest online community of parents in Romania. As a result of a purposive search (with key words such as parent, parenting, sex education, sex health, child, young people, adolescent, communication) of the discussion forum for a period of five month (from December 2015 to April 2016) a total number of 5 discussion threads relevant for the objective of this study were identified and selected. The oldest posts of these threads date back to 2012 while the most recent ones are from April 2016.

Due to ethical considerations, the name of the website will not be revealed even though members' identity and personal information is protected by website policy and the anonymity provided by usernames. The content of these public posts is made available to the public by the website and accessing, observing and retrieving it was not dependent on member status and could be done by the authors without breaching the policy of the site. When processing the data, any details that could help identify users, including usernames, were removed and new numerical codes were attributed to posts. An inductive approach was used to develop codes for the data, followed by the identification of sub-themes, themes and main themes.

3. Results

The data set analysed consists of a total of 5 discussion threads composed of 422 posts written by a total of 80 different users. Approx. 10 of them posted just once on these threads while a similar number of them posted between ten and thirty times. After completing the six phases of thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) we were able to identify a multitude of (sub-)themes that were later grouped, based on their interpretation, into other themes and main themes. Three major themes were identified: 1) *sex education significance*; 2) *sexual development and sexual behaviour of children and young people* and 3) *parenting sexually developing children and young people*. A fourth theme, *miscellaneous*, was created for all the sub-themes that did not fit into any of the previous three categories.

3.1 Sex education significance

Parents' debates and discussions concentrated around themes such as, what constitutes sex education and which are the best approaches to it, which are the sources of sex education and what their role as sex educators is. Parents sought and provided information and personal opinions regarding the meaning of sex education, about the role of abstinence-oriented or a more comprehensive sex education and inquired about the appropriate age for sex education (e.g., (2/1/4/3) – “after all, what is sex education and what is it made of? Is it its ultimate purpose the preservation of children's/adolescents' chastity or is it the consumption on a large scale of contraceptives that destroy the hormonal system of girls from a very young age?”; (2/5/7/2) - “if sex education starts when is needed by each child (I agree), then the 15 years old limit for it can't be generally applied”; (2/1/7/1) “my opinion, from a parent's perspective, is that it shouldn't start at a certain age but that we should be open to it from their first questions”; (2/1/1/4) – “parents came to school to make sure that there won't be a psychologist or a doctor telling such shameful things to their children, then 8th graders”).

The majority of parents expressed the opinion that parents' role in the sexual health and education of their children is a central, for some even an exclusive one, while others also shared beliefs and information about the contribution of schools, of educational and health professionals, of the media and of the extended family and peer group. Parents requested (general and specific) information regarding resources that would help them with their efforts and suggested books, articles and films (e.g., (2/5/7/6) – “I think that the information received from within the family is essential and it should be supplemented with information from school and with parents' good knowledge of the peer group that the child hangs out with”; (2/3/5/2) – “this is the funny one [book] about which, I am pointing out to you, some parents might have a shock, so read it before you give it to your child”).

There was also a significant number of parents who expressed of the opinion that information leads to curiosity and sexualisation of the children while other were altogether skeptical regarding any effects of sexual education. A considerable portion of the discussions revolved around the role of religion, morals and of the community norms and cultural aspects in influencing the approach to sex education both in schools and at home (e.g., (2/1/4/4) – “I think that as long as the mass-media profoundly perverts human sexuality, parents are doing sex education in vain”).

3.2 Sexual development and sexual behaviour of children and young people

Two patterns of parental discourse on sexual development and sexual behaviour in children and young people were identified in the analysed data items: 1) sexual life of adolescents (with sub-themes: sexual behaviour of children and adolescents; physical and psychological development of children and adolescents; sexual attraction and romantic feelings; sexual orientation); 2) influencing and controlling the sex life and consequences of sex life in adolescents (sub-themes: school life, social life and sex life; safe sex and consequences of sex life; parental and environmental influence on children's sexual behaviour; prevention and management of sex life).

The majority of the information parents asked for or offered revolved around physical and psychological features of adolescents and the age-appropriateness of various sexual behaviours met in adolescents although there were references made to earlier developmental periods. Parents expressed a wide variety of sometimes contradicting beliefs and attitudes regarding the developmental changes that their children in particular and children and young people in general are going through from a sexual perspective (e.g., (3/3/2/1) – “my darlings, a lad at 15 (and a half) spends a lot of time thinking (reading, talking, watching) of sex”).

The majority of parents expressed the belief that sexual activity is appropriate for adult age although not all of them agreed. Many of the parents equated sex life with maturity, stability and responsibility and love while others believed that sexual attraction is separate from love and feelings (e.g., (3/2/4/1) – “it's early [15 ½ years old] but there is nothing scandalous about it if he and the girl are sincerely in love”). Only a few posts were referring to sexual orientation but in positive terms and people were concerned with how to recognise it and talk to children about it.

Many posts contrasted a demanding school life and academic success with sex life in adolescents (e.g., (4/2/2/1) - “mine is 17 and has no time for anything except school”). A lots of parents' posts contained a gendered approach towards sexual behaviour and the factors influencing it. When referring to consequences of sex, the majority of parents actually meant negative consequences. A recurring aspect of the posts was the presence of criticism and judgemental statements made by parents based on their interpretation of others' opinions, especially on the topic of safe sex, contraception and sexual rights of young people (e.g., (4/3/5/5) – “I see you are very relaxed talking about birth control pills for 16 year-old girls. You are probably familiar only with their effect in avoiding pregnancy. Until you encourage your own daughter to take something like this you should read a little bit, at least to do it knowingly”).

3.3 Parenting sexually developing children and young people

Regarding the parenting practices revolving around the sexual development of children and young people, the following themes were identified: parents as guardians of their children's safety; parents as sexual educators; parent-child communication about sex; parents' emotions about parenting.

Parents agreed almost unanimously that children's well-being and safety is their responsibility and discussed what they can do to preserve it, asking for specific information and advice on particular problems they described and making suggestions mainly based on personal experience. The majority of them suggested a more restrictive approach to parenting while others, although not so many, suggested a more relaxed approach. Many parents referred to open parent-child communication but in terms of

parents answering questions when asked (e.g., (5/15/8/2) - “all the parents I know want their children to excel in school, not to have boy/girlfriends or sex or other distractions from what is important”; (5/6/1/1) - “I know that if you have conversations with your children about STIs, about protection, about having sex when ready and not out of curiosity, or because of peer pressure or at girl/boyfriends’ pressure and without nagging them too much, without saturating them with the negative consequences then you should be confident that everything will be alright”; (2/3/7/3) - “I plan to answer on point and without unnecessary, unsolicited details to everything they ask”).

What parents can teach children to ensure their safety and well-being was mentioned in the majority of posts and various resources and sources were referenced (books, films, videos, family members and professionals). Parents had little concerns regarding the scientific validity of their opinions and suggestions and disputed other’ based on experience and own beliefs (e.g., (5/7/1/1) - “I’m not talking about attitudes, that’s deceiving for me, I’m not good at that ... I’m talking about the body. Even though I saw that some are putting these changes down to the usual hormones, I maintain that I can guess with precision (over a few months) the moment of becoming sexually active, just for girls (it might also happen to boys, but I haven’t looked at them)”). A lot of anxiety, criticism, sarcasm and defensive arguments about parental practices and skills were present in the posts but there was also humor, communication of empathy and support for other parents and their decisions and opinions.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how parents and potential parents on a Romanian-based online discussion forum reported their needs, beliefs and practices regarding the sexual health and education of their children or of children and young people in general.

As presented above, Romanian parents had very different responses regarding sex education information and advice seeking and this points towards the strong possibility of parents not attributing the same meaning to sexual education and of them forging and expressing attitudes towards it based on their personal definitions. Previous studies have pointed out the fact that parents have very different skills, beliefs, attitudes and personal values regarding the sexuality and sexual education of children and sometimes these might act as barriers to sexual education (Dyson & Smith, 2012). Also, the reliability of recommended sources and resources for sex education is a point of debate, many parents preferring personal experience to scientific knowledge and usually not indicating the source of their information. Nevertheless, the posts reveal that there is a strong desire on the part of parents to gain information and advice mostly from other parents but also from professional sources.

A significant proportion of the posts pointed towards the fact that Romanian parents considered it a successful practice in terms of sexual health of their children to address the topic of sex only when asked or only when children reached a certain age parents deemed appropriate for a “sex talk” and, as presented above, that usually meant late teens. Similar findings about the parent-child open communication about sex were reported by previous studies (Kirkland, Rosenthal & Feldman, 2005). This aspect could also be worth taking into account by health professionals and educational experts in

tailoring their approaches and interventions accordingly. That in itself might constitute an issue since some of the parents disagree with professionals' involvement in their children's sex education.

Parents' definitions of sexual health and well-being might be very different, many of them referring to it in terms of the absence of negative consequences, such as sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies or abortions and very few mentioning the possibility of positive aspects related to sexual life. Parents also shared misconceptions and scientifically inaccurate beliefs with other parents, especially about the physical changes (not due to puberty or pregnancy) that are supposedly evident on the bodies of sexually active adolescent girls and about the safety of using some forms of contraception in the detriment of others (e.g., birth control pill instead of condoms).

The underlying theme of all the posts was the difficulty of parenting. The majority of parents mentioned it and attributed an external locus of control for it, but the anxiety about their parenting and children's well-being was frequently mentioned and the requests for advice and the sharing of own experiences and of information suggested the belief that they could still influence the outcomes.

Parents usually responded to other discussion-participants' requests for advice and information by being most of the time supportive although the amount of negative interactions was not negligible. They made intergenerational and intercultural comparisons and often generalized their conclusions, many times expressing a "one fits all" view when asking or giving advice.

5. Conclusion

The conclusions of this study are limited by the choice of data, the fact that it was collected from a single online parenting discussion forum and in one period of time. These are though, as was mentioned earlier, the results of a preliminary analysis of a limited data set from the entire available data corpus, the analysis of which is being still in progress.

The results of our thematic analysis of the partial data sampled from a Romanian-based online parenting asynchronous discussion board show that parents are frequently using this medium in interactions with other parents. Romanian parents use it to seek and share information, advice and experience and to receive and offer support related to their expressed needs and concerns about the sexual health of their children and about their parenting skills relevant for it. It seems that parents do benefit from these interactions to a certain extent, especially by creating online support communities and accessing a considerable and diverse amount of information but there are also concerns about the effects of the negative interactions that they might be exposed to and about the reliability of the information thus exchanged. It is yet unclear how this could affect their parenting practices and skills. This could though constitute a further line of research on this topic.

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