
Understanding The Use Of Social Technologies During A Life Transition: Men's Experience with Fertility Problems

Dilisha Patel

University College London
London, UK
dilisha.patel@ucl.ac.uk

Ann Blandford

University College London
London, UK
a.blandford@ucl.ac.uk

Jill Shawe

University of Plymouth
Plymouth, UK
jill.shawe@plymouth.ac.uk

Judith Stephenson

University College London
London, UK
judith.stephenson@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

Transition to parenthood is a common experience but one that can be particularly challenging for people who have difficulty in conceiving. Men are reportedly likely to feel isolated and stigmatised when they experience fertility problems and are more likely to turn to sources of social technology for support than approach healthcare services. We share our findings from two studies with data from two different sources; online forum comments and semi-structured qualitative interviews to explore how and why men use technology when they experience fertility problems. We report our findings in relation to the proposed workshop themes.

Author Keywords

Life Transitions, Social Technology, Online Forums, Fertility, Finding a New Normal, Sense-making, Men

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CSCW'19, November 9-13th, 2019, Austin, Texas, USA
ACM 978-1-4503-6819-3/20/04.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3334480.XXXXXXX>

Introduction

Most people experience a number of major transitions during in their lifetime; one can be the decision to have children, though the expected transition to parenthood may not progress as anticipated: difficulties in conception can affect up to 15% of couples worldwide [1]. 50% of all infertility cases globally have a male factor influence. Despite this prevalence, infertility is not always openly shared or discussed, which can lead to men feeling isolated, stigmatised and excluded [2].

The perceived stigma and sensitivities that surround infertility can limit the avenues of support men seek, leading men who desire support feeling uncertain about where to access it. Feelings of isolation can direct men to look to social technologies and online forms of information and support during this difficult time [5, 6]. This research aims to understand how technology can support men when they experience a transition into realising they have to manage infertility. We propose that by understanding the information seeking journey an individual goes through when experiencing this unexpected life transition, we can appropriately design social resources to reduce isolation and disorientation as well as improve their well-being during the life transition.

We present our findings from two studies to illustrate how men managed their online information seeking and sense-making journey that followed an unexpected life disruption of infertility during an expected transition towards parenthood.

Methods

We have undertaken two studies to explore the role of social technologies in the context of fertility difficulties.

Study 1 will be presented at CSCW 2019 [7]. Here we

collected data from open online forums to understand how men navigate online communities for support when experiencing fertility problems. A total of 603 posts were analysed from online forums that were dedicated to people who were trying to conceive.

Study 2 was an in-depth qualitative interview study of 28 male participants who recently had or were currently experiencing fertility problems. These participants were recruited online via social media and face to face from fertility clinics. We present preliminary findings from Study 2, as analysis is ongoing at the point of submission.

Study 1: Online Forum Data

For detailed methods please see [7]. 603 posts were analysed from three unique forums dedicated to an online community of those struggling to conceive. The extracted posts were anonymised before analysis. The posts were iteratively analysed to understand men's feelings and needs when experiencing fertility problems.

Study 2: Interview Study

We aimed to recruit participants with a range of socioeconomic and specific fertility related characteristics, such as having a diagnosis of male-related, female-related or unexplained infertility, whether they already had or did not have children or had previous unsuccessful pregnancies, to ensure we collected the information from a representative sample of men who were trying to conceive. All respondents who chose to participate in our study self-identified as male and were in heterosexual relationships.

All interviews were undertaken by the first author. 14 were carried out in-person and 14 were over the phone. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were anonymised before being analysed with a thematic analysis approach.

Each quote is labelled with a unique non-identifiable code and the study from which it arose. All quotations used from Study 1 have been paraphrased to limit deanonymisation, whereas quotes from Study 2 are verbatim.

Results

We present our selected findings in accordance with five of the eight proposed workshop themes.

Life events vs. Processes

Those who wish to become parents often had the expectation that once they decided to have children, it would happen effortlessly. There was less consideration and thought that their transition to parenthood might be hindered.

I mean, I think I was very naive about things then, and I just thought it was going to happen, it was going to work. We had no reason to suspect that we were going to have any challenges. (Study 2 - IC13)

Initially when the decision was made to try and conceive the most common source of information sought was online due to its ease of access and privacy. Couples sought advice on how to conceive, which could include the use of digital period and ovulation trackers:

First of all, it involved just basically stopping using contraception and then maybe about a couple of months in, my wife was reading some material online and she started to think about timings and things like that, so she downloaded an app, which was just a simple menstrual cycle tracker. (Study 2 - BW7)

or obtaining advice from online forums to understand what was considered normal during the process of trying to conceive.

Hello, I am not sure I can deal with trying to make a baby, I didn't know it would be so hard. Here I am, the husband, looking for some advice and support from you all. (Study 1 - 725383)

Not expecting to encounter any problems, the realisation of having fertility difficulties can be a major life event on their journey. Some describe the fertility process as a significant disruption to their lives, as their daily routine was interrupted and replaced by a series of confusing and intensive processes.

[Fertility treatment was] Massively daunting and just so confusing... I know I always feel like, somehow we muddled through and we managed it, but we're both graduates, and we struggled with it enormously. (Study 2 - GH10)

I'm also dealing with the guilt of being the person in our marriage with infertility problems... The guilt surrounds her being the one taking all the drugs, the shots, etc., and I'm the one with issues. (Study 1 - 484619)

Changing Identities

Whilst men were anticipating a change of identity towards fatherhood, they experienced unexpected doubts about their own identity. This theme was prominent in both studies; the inability to easily conceive challenged men's own identity and their self-perceived role as a man. There were multiple reports of feeling "less like a man" in both data sets. This was reported as one of the main motivators to turn to social technologies for information and support. Another objective reported was the need to find others like themselves in order to establish whether they were alone in their feelings and to find guidance on how to manage the fertility process.

I joined this group because I'm trying to make sure I'm not

alone in this situation... I need to know how you guys handle this... Has anyone been in this situation? I hope someone can help. (Study 1 - 724865)

Through the fertility journey men reported feeling a sense of changed identities within their relationships. Previously they felt like they were partners and equals, which seemed to change towards the role of a supporter or bystander witnessing their partner having to undergo invasive procedures.

I sort of see my role... more being with her. Standing by her. Looking after her. And then guiding where I see fit. (Study 2 - IC13)

Technology non-use during life transition

Our findings from Study 2 indicate that once a difficulty in conception was recognised, couples would often self-refer themselves to a health professional for support and guidance.

After a year, we realised that something isn't quite right. Nothing was happening. We wanted a professional opinion. (Study 2 - ON12)

Whilst many men reported wanting information and support from social sources, there was also a strong need for information from trusted and reliable sources, which in this case was often reported to be trained and qualified health professionals.

So I trust what the professionals are telling me basically. (Study 2 - MR2)

Participants reported feeling a level of mistrust in social forums and using search engines, as on several occasions

they were referred to being "Dr Google" inferring a level of unreliability.

Dr Google is a problem, because you can quickly get onto websites that aren't necessarily scientifically supported, it's all kind of hearsay, and anecdotal evidence. (Study 2 - MW4)

Our results indicate that different kinds of support are wanted at the different transition stages. With regards to advice on health related topics or actions to be taken, health professional advice was preferred, whereas when trying to understand their personal feelings and to manage their expectations, social forms of input were most valued.

Theoretical frames to draw from

We found that men had a tendency to try and make sense of the information they acquired in order for it have meaning for themselves during their transitional journey. There are variations of theoretical frameworks which aim to depict this information seeking journey. We found that our results enabled us to elaborate the existing theoretical model of Finding a "New Normal" as presented by Genuis and Bronstein [4]. This is presented in detail in our work [7] and is replicated in Figure 1.

We found that during the numerous transitions along the fertility journey the need for information and support may differ. The elaboration of the Finding a "New Normal" model demonstrates this information journey as well as highlights points where social support could be beneficial.

Methodological considerations

We acknowledge that collecting longitudinal cohort data on life transitions would be valuable, as gathering data from users during their life transition could limit recall bias associated with retrospective recall. However, there are

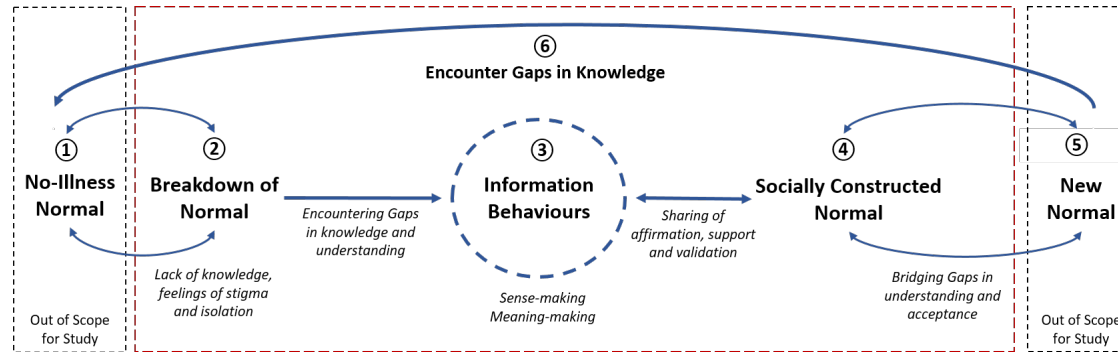


Figure 1: Finding a New Normal Model [4] elaborated to the context of Fertility. Reproduced from Patel et al [7]

benefits to collecting data once a life transition has occurred, which include participants being able to report insights with the benefit of hindsight of the entire process.

Participants in Study 2 were either currently undergoing fertility treatment, had successfully conceived with their partners or had recently become parents. This enabled us to collect rich and diverse data from participants at varying stages of their life transition, which was a methodological benefit.

There are benefits to collecting data from online sources, especially if the subject is seen to be private or potentially stigmatising [5, 3]. Online forums provide a safe space where users are able to share their feelings openly under the veil of anonymity. However the limitation of online data is that we may not be able to identify contextual or demographic information about the online users we are studying. Therefore we are only able to generalise findings to the context of study.

We found that by collecting data from both of these sources we were able to triangulate findings to better understand the different uses of social technologies by men as they experience their life transition.

Conclusions & Next Steps

As one of the goals of this workshop is to make connections between the workshop themes, we have illustrated how they are related to our work of supporting men as they experience fertility problems. Our next steps involve further analysing how men's needs differ through their fertility journey and investigating how we might design for their transitioning needs. Through further discussion and collaboration at this workshop, we can learn from one another and gain insights into research in different themes and contexts. We hope to contribute to setting agendas for further research to enable design around life transitions and social technologies.

This research is funded by an EPSRC DTG PhD Studentship.

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