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An examination of parents' online activities and links to demographic characteristics among parents in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined parents' online activities and whether engagement in specific activities attracts certain parents. Additionally, we examined sub-groups of parents regarding their difficulties to interpret and deal with online information. We used a sample of 401 parents of children below the age of five living in Sweden. The results showed that most parents used the Internet frequently, but there were differences in what activities parents were involved in. In general, results suggested that mothers and parents of younger children used the Internet more to find information about parenting related issues compared to fathers and parents of older children. Mothers seemed to rely more on online information in their parenting role than did fathers, but at the same time, they reported more troubles dealing with the information they found online. Additionally, parents with higher education read parenting blogs whereas parents with lower education posted photos and information on Social Networking Sites (SNS). The results of this study offer important knowledge regarding variations in parents' online use and might be used to develop support offered to different groups of parents.

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Demographic differences; interpretation of online information; parents' online activities; sources of information

Introduction

The use of technology in socializing and retrieving information is nowadays a normal part of everyday life for most people in Western countries. Furthermore, technology is penetrating more deeply into our everyday life, which has a major influence on the way we think and behave (Schroeder, 2018). The Internet is seen by many parents as an important platform for their parenting role (Lupton et al., 2016; Lupton, 2016). In fact, most parents use it on a regular basis (e.g., Baker et al., 2017; Laws et al., 2019). Searching for information about parenting related issues and discussing with other parents on Social Networking Sites (SNS) have been listed by parents as the most important reasons to use the Internet (Haslam et al., 2017; Plantin & Daneback, 2009; Pretorius et al., 2019; Strange et al., 2018). Besides these

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general patterns, not enough is known about how various groups of parents use the Internet. This information is important in the development of advice given by professionals (e.g., social workers, counselors etc.) to parents about how they can make use of the opportunities that the Internet is offering and avoid potential problems. In this study, we explore online use among parents of children ages five or younger living in Sweden. We do this across multiple activities related to the parenting role, and we examine the relation to several demographic variables.

Parents' activities on the internet and SNS

There are different online resources available for parents. Three main arenas have been identified in the literature (Lupton et al., 2016): (1) Parenting websites and discussion forums, (2) parenting blogs, and (3) SNS.

First, parenting websites and forums include information about certain parenting aspects and are contexts for parents to discuss with each other (Lupton et al., 2016). Parents often enter these websites following a search for parenting related issues or questions (for a review, see Plantin & Daneback, 2009). Parenting websites vary in the level of interactive possibilities. Any websites that allow social interaction is considered a social media site. However, parenting websites often differs from other social media sites, such as Facebook (see section below about SNS), where the social interactions are in focus rather than the inclusion of parenting information that characterizes parenting websites. Prior studies have shown that parents value these sites and forums because they provide support and information on various parenting issues (e.g., information about nutritional supplements, breast feeding, child rearing), possibilities for identification with other parents, and sharing of experiences, which all can work as an addition to the advice given by professionals (e.g., midwives, social workers, counselors etc.) (Lupton et al., 2016; Lupton, 2016; O'connor & Madge, 2004; Valan et al., 2018).

Second, parenting blogs are often similar to parenting forums and websites in that they offer parenting related information (Lupton et al., 2016), but they do not offer the same dialogue-based setting as the parenting forums do. Blogs are often read on a regular basis (Lupton et al., 2016) and are, thus, probably not entered as a result of searching for parent related information using search engines (as is the case for parenting websites). Most research on blogging focus on mothers. The results show that many mothers blog in order to document their experiences and to share these with other parents (McDaniel et al., 2012; Pettigrew et al., 2016). Specifically, it offers a community formation context of self-imagining and a source of validation in the parenting role (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Pettigrew et al., 2016), which can be positive for the blogging parents' well-being (McDaniel et al., 2012).

Third, SNS offer ways for parents to keep in contact with family and friends, upload, respond to, tag, or share other people's content (Lupton et al., 2016).

Additionally, SNS constitute an extended context for external input in which parents can receive feedback and compare themselves with other parents who are not in their closest context (e.g., comparisons with celebrities), so called comparative reference groups (e.g., Bauman & May, 2004). In an American study, most mothers and fathers reported being active on SNS (Bartholomew et al., 2012), making it a common arena for parents and sharing of parenting related content.

Hence, parents use the Internet to a great deal, but the different arenas might fulfill different needs. In general, parents use parenting websites and parenting blogs to gain information about different parenting aspects, and they use SNS to keep in contact with friends and family, as well as sharing and commenting on parenting related material.

Parents' ways of dealing with online information

The increased Internet access has sometimes been described as an information revolution or information flood (Schroeder, 2018). Although this flood of information might not be problematic for parents in general (Schroeder, 2018), some groups of parents might find it difficult to interpret and deal with online information, and, thus, cannot make use of it (Rotbaum et al., 2008). The Internet offers a context in which parents can get advice and ideas on parenting related issues from multiple sources (Porter & Ispa, 2013), but it requires that parents can critically evaluate the quality of the information they retrieve. In fact, parents acknowledge the complex nature of online communication (Strange et al., 2018). For example, parents report that they appreciate the instant information that the Internet offers, but they also raise concerns that the information provided could, at times, be conflicting (Strange et al., 2018). Hence, the amount of information that the Internet offers is not completely unproblematic.

The abundance of advice and ideas that parents face online (and offline) should be understood in relation to larger trends in our society. Sociologists, like Anthony Giddens (1991), have argued that in the late modern society, individuals are exposed to the fact that all knowledge, even knowledge gained from experts, is valid only until further notice. Furthermore, individuals are faced with much information, but very little substantial guidance on how to incorporate it in their personal lives. In fact, child health nurses have reported concerns that parents might not have the ability to think critically about the information they retrieve online, and that for insecure or stressed parents, diverse information online can cause confusion or stress (Valan et al., 2018). Hence, information on the Internet can be empowering for parents, but only if they know how to evaluate and interpret it so that it can be beneficial for them in their parenting role. Parents' experiences of online information have not received much focus in earlier research or theory. As such, there is a lack of

knowledge on sub-groups of parents who have more troubles interpreting and making use of online information. In the current study, we develop a measure of parents' experiences of online information and examine its links to demographic variables.

Differences in parents' online use as a result of demographic characteristics

Although previous research has identified some general online user patterns, there is still a lack of knowledge about whether engagement in specific activities attracts certain groups of parents. This has not, yet, been studied systematically including multiple demographic variables as predictors of different online activities. To include multiple demographic variables in the same study – and examine how these are related to the three arenas identified in the literature – offers an opportunity to examine their predictive and unique effects, while controlling for the other variables.

Prior studies have examined differences in parents' online use in relation to gender, age, socio-economic status (SES), and ethnicity. First, parents of younger children, younger parents, and mothers (Baker et al., 2017; Laws et al., 2019; Plantin & Daneback, 2009; Radey & Randolph, 2009) have been shown to be frequent users of parenting websites to find parenting-related information. Regarding immigrant background, some studies have shown tendencies for more use of the Internet among parents who are born in another country than the data collection (Laws et al., 2019), whereas other studies have shown no such differences (Radey & Randolph, 2009). Parents with higher education have been shown to use the Internet more to find parenting information (Radey & Randolph, 2009; Rotbaum et al., 2008), in other studies this association was only found among fathers (Laws et al., 2019). Additional studies have not found a significant link between education and parents use of the Internet to find parenting information (Haslam et al., 2017). One review study found evidence that parents who had fewer children used the Internet to search for information more so than parents who had more children (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). Second, concerning parenting blogs, one study suggested that the average blogger is a white middle-class mother with higher levels of education and income compared with non-bloggers (Lupton et al., 2016), but other studies have shown no demographic differences between blogging mothers and non-blogging mothers (McDaniel et al., 2012). Little, however, is known about what characterizes parents who read parenting blogs. Third, research has shown that younger parents, parents of younger children, and mothers are more prominent users of SNS (Baker et al., 2017; Haslam et al., 2017; McDaniel et al., 2012) in comparison to their counterparts. Hence, although most parents make use of the Internet in their parenting role, there seems to be differences depending on some

demographic variables. Generally, mothers, younger parents, and parents of younger children seem to be the most common users of the Internet and SNS related to their parenting role.

Applying theories on gender and media use might shed light on why mothers and fathers differ, as well as why the age of the parent is important. Specifically, in everyday life, mothers and fathers experience different demands and expectations in their parenting role (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Lundqvist et al., 2017), with mothers often experiencing stronger demands on being a “good” parent than are fathers (Tryggvason et al., 2012). As SNS and the Internet offers multiple ideas on parenting related information, mothers might use this source more so than fathers to get ideas about how to behave and how to reach the high perceived mothering demands. Further, regarding the age of the parent, according to the uses and gratification theory (Ruggiero, 2000), people are active in their media consumption, and they choose what types of media to use. However, to use the Internet as a source of information demands at least some level of Internet literacy. Younger people belong to a generation who have more experience with technology and higher Internet literacy (Eshet-Alkalai & Chajut, 2009), probably making them better equipped to search for information online and to use the Internet as one (and sometimes the only) source of information. This might explain why younger parents tend to use the Internet more than older parents. On the other hand, younger people show less skills in critical thinking regarding information (Eshet-Alkalai & Chajut, 2009), which suggests that younger parents might have more troubles evaluating the information they retrieve compared to older parents. This latter hypothesis has not been tested in previous research but will be examined in this study.

With regards to age differences, it should be noted that there is natural overlap between parents’ age and other variables. Specifically, younger parents more often have both younger and fewer children, and, thus, also have fewer parenting experiences that could help them in their parenting role. For example, having more than one child has been shown to influence parenting in general (e.g., Glatz & Stattin, 2013; Glatz et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2012). Theoretically, experiences of raising an older child can be seen as a “first draft” (Lam et al., 2012) and parents can learn from these experiences when raising a younger child. From this line of ideas, it is possible that parents who have fewer children use the Internet for parenting related issues more so than parents with more children, as they can get access to other parents’ experiences or find information about parenting related issues that they themselves do not have experience from. This might also be true for parents of younger children, as they have fewer parenting experiences to base their decisions on, in comparisons to parents of older children.

The impact of parents’ education can be understood in terms of a digital divide (Bonfadelli, 2002). Specifically, this idea suggests that people of higher

SES (e.g., higher education) have more access to information and the growth of knowledge is stronger. Further, there are studies suggesting that using the Internet to find information is especially high among high SES groups (Rotbaum et al., 2008) and that they can make better use of the knowledge gained from this information.

The current study

In this study, we expand on the current knowledge about what kind of online activities that parents engage in and demographic factors that might be associated with these activities. Additionally, we examine parents' experiences of dealing with and making use of online information and what sub-groups of parents who experience most troubles on this matter. We use data collected from biological parents of children below the age of five living in Sweden. The Internet use in Sweden has been on a high level the last 25 years compared to some other countries, offering opportunities for studies on parents' Internet use.

The parental support in Sweden differs from many other industrialized countries in which much of the support is privatized, and, thus, not available to all parents. Sweden has an extensive national childcare program that is offered to all parents of children below the age of six. This program includes health care visits at governmental-run childcare centers, in which parents can talk to professionals about their parenting role and the child's development. During the early years of the child's life (and during the pregnancy), parents can attend multiple free-of-charged meetings. Related to the topic of this study, professionals at the childcare centers have noticed that some parents need extra support in their use of the Internet and SNS (Valan et al., 2018), and these professionals can offer a compliment to information that parents find online. As such, the national childcare program is an important part of the social and institutional context in Sweden, in which parents can benefit from available and free support regarding, for example, their use of the Internet and SNS.

Another important part of the Swedish context is the strong norm on gender equality (i.e., that mothers and fathers are viewed as equally important in their parenting role). In this sense, mothers and fathers are expected to share the responsibility of the childcare. In fact, mothers and fathers in Sweden have the same opportunity to be on parental leave, and Swedish fathers have since the 1970s been encouraged to make use of this opportunity. These attempts have been successful in increasing the use of parental leave among fathers. Importantly to note, however, is that even in more egalitarian countries, such as Sweden, fathers and mothers might still experience different pressure how to perform in their parenting role. For example, some researchers have

suggested that parenting forums often reinforce traditional gendered parenting stereotypes (Rashley, 2005). For practitioners within the national childcare program, they often meet both mothers and fathers, and, thus, this support must target parenting related issues in general, as well as mothering and fathering in particular. To know more about potential differences in mothers' and fathers' use of the Internet and SNS is, thus, a prerequisite for effective parental support.

The online activities examined in this study are based on the three arenas identified in earlier research (Lupton et al., 2016): Websites and forums [searching for parent-related information on such]; Parenting blogs [both reading and writing parenting blogs]; and SNS [active use, such as posting photos and information on SNS]. In addition to parents' online activities, we examine what groups of parents that have more difficulties in dealing with online information. For demographic variables, we used earlier research as a starting point, but we also based our choice of predictors on Belsky's model of determinants of parenting (Belsky, 1984; Taraban & Shaw, 2018), in which parenting can be explained by parental, child, and contextual factors. Specifically, parent' gender, age, and ethnicity (i.e., parental factors), child's age (i.e., child factors), and socio-economic status (i.e., contextual factor) have all been shown to be important for different online activities among parents. These were, thus, included as predictors of online activities in the current study. Additionally, we used number of biological children as an example of a contextual factor.

Based on results of earlier research and theory, we had hypotheses about some differences. However, although theory and earlier research did not offer clear ideas on all potential differences, we examined all demographic factors as predictors for all online activities, as this would offer new knowledge about activities within certain parenting groups.

Hypothesis 1: Younger parents, parents of younger children, and mothers would use the Internet and SNS more than their counterparts.

Hypothesis 2: Parents who have fewer children and parents with higher education will use the Internet to find information on parenting issues more so than parents who have more children and parents with lower education, respectively.

Hypothesis 3: Younger parents would experience more troubles dealing with online information than older parents.

Method

Procedures

In this study, we used survey reports from 401 parents living in Sweden who had at least one biological child who was five years or younger. The data were drawn from a project on parents' use of the Internet and SNS. For this study, specifically, we used parents' reports on their activities online and information on demographic variables to examine various sub-groups of parents and their use of the Internet. The project, including the data management plan, was approved by the national authority for ethical issues in research (number 2019-04790) before the data were gathered. Parents received a gift card of 50 Swedish crowns (approximately 5US dollars) in compensation for their participation, which was sent to their e-mail-addresses. We used a secure online platform for the survey that was provided by the university and developed to follow regulations concerning safety of data. This included methods to reduce the risk of violations and threats, and loss of data. In addition to the use of a platform with a built-in system for protection of data, all data were handled in accordance with ethical standards (e.g., dealing with personal information, such as e-mail-addresses). After receiving information about the project, parents had to give active consent to participate in the project and respond to the survey. The survey took approximately 20–30 minutes to finish, and parents could do it either on a smartphone or a computer. Parents were asked to respond to the questions concerning their youngest child, given that this child was younger than five years.

Participants were recruited in two ways and the data collection took place in January 2020. To recruit parents with different Internet and SNS use, we decided to recruit both online and offline. All parents responded to the same survey, independent of the recruitment procedure.

Offline recruitment

Parents recruited offline were all visitors at family centers in a town in mid-Sweden (population 154,000 in year 2019). A family center is a voluntary meeting place for parents in which they have access to support from social workers, pedagogical staff, and nurses. Often, the family centers are located in more disadvantaged areas with a goal to reach parents who might be in need of extra support in their parenting role. Most parents visiting the family centres are mothers of children below age six, and parents often visit these centres during their parental leave (i.e., during the first year of the child's life). However, some of the family centers organize specific groups for fathers, and these were visited to recruit fathers in an attempt to get more equal numbers of fathers and mothers. The project investigator visited all family centres at least once and offered information to parents and collected e-mail-addresses from parents who were interested in participating in the project.

Online recruitment

Additional parents were recruited on the Internet and SNS. Advertisements were posted on parenting sites and forums (Familjeliv.se; Libero.se; Allt för föräldrar), parenting blogs, and in Facebook-groups for parents. Attempts were made to recruit parents from sites and groups that were specifically targeting fathers and/or mothers (e.g., Facebook-groups targeting only fathers or only mothers). Parents who were interested in participating followed a link to the survey.

Comparing the online-recruited sample with the offline-recruited sample on demographic variables (parents' and children's age, children's gender, parents' gender, education, family structure, biological children, parents' employment status, and whether they were born in Sweden or not), showed two significant differences. Parents in the online-recruited sample had somewhat higher education, and fewer parents were born outside of Sweden (5%) compared to parents in the offline-recruited sample (17%). Hence, the two recruitment procedures complemented each other, as they increased variability in parents' education and country of birth.

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 401 parents of children below the age of five ($M_{age} = 1.26$ years). Of these, 103 parents (26%) were recruited offline and 298 (74%) were recruited online. The ratio of fathers versus mothers were about the same in the online (15% fathers and 85% mothers) and offline (19% fathers and 81% mothers) recruited samples. Most parents were mothers (86%), but among the children, there were an equal number of girls ($n = 202$) and boys ($n = 196$). About half of the parents (46%) had one child and the rest had two (40%) or more (14%) children. Most parents were between 26 and 39 years of age ($M_{age} = 32.29$ years) and most of them lived together with a partner (93%). Concerning education, 2% had graduated ninth grade only, 25% had a high school degree only, 10% had a degree from a professional school, 61% had a university degree (e.g., master's degree), and 2% had a PhD. Finally, most parents were born in Sweden (92%). Compared to the country as a whole, our sample included more parents with a university degree or a degree from a professional school (74%, compared to 50% for people 25 to 44 years of age in the country in 2018) (SCB, 2018). Finally, our sample had about the same number of single-parent families (7%) as can be found among parents of children below the age of 5 in the country as a whole (8% in 2018). Hence, in general, the sample used in this study was similar to the corresponding population in Sweden but included an overrepresentation of parents with higher education, and an underrepresentation of fathers and parents born outside of Sweden.

Measures

Demographic variables

We used the following parents' and children's demographic characteristics as predictors of online activities: Parents' gender and age, child's age, parents' education (as a proxy for SES), number of biological children, and whether parents were born in Sweden or not. Parents' gender and country of origin were categorical variables, and the rest of the predictors were used as continuous variables.

Parents online activities

With a starting point in the three main arenas of parents' online activities (e.g., Lupton et al., 2016; Pretorius et al., 2019), parents were asked to report how often they were involved in the following online activities: "Using SNS," "Posting pictures of their child on SNS," "Writing things on SNS concerning their child or their parenting role," "Reading parenting or child-related blogs/vlogs," "Searching for information on the Internet concerning parenting or children," and "Writing on their own parenting blog." These six items were kept separate in all analyses to correspond to earlier research and to examine somewhat different activities on the Internet and SNS. Response options ranged from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*Several times a day*). All response options for these questions are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the online activities.

Online activity	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% Never	% Every month	% Every week	% Several times a week	% Every day	% Several times a day
SNS use	5.40	0.93	0.7	1.7	2.5	5.5	31.2	58.4
Photos on SNS	1.95	0.89	33.0	47.1	12.6	6.5	0.8	0
Info on SNS	1.66	0.82	50.4	38.0	7.3	3.5	0.8	0
Reading blogs	2.80	1.43	24.0	23.2	19.4	17.4	14.1	1.8
Search for information	2.83	0.97	4.0	38.9	33.1	18.7	5.1	0.3
Writing blog	1.05	0.31	96.7	2.5	0.3	0.3	0.3	0
			% Almost never/never	% Pretty seldom	% Pretty often	% Almost always/Always		
Dealing with online info	2.10	0.53	-	-	-	-		
Relying on info from ...								
... the Internet	1.88	0.71	32%	50%	17%	1%		
... SNS	1.70	0.66	41%	48%	11%	0%		

Relying on = what sources of information parents rely on in their parenting role. SNS = Social Networking Sites. *N* = 401.

Reliance on different sources of information

Two items were developed for this project to measure how much parents relied on the Internet and SNS in their parenting role. The purpose was to examine sources of inspiration and advice that might influence parents in their parenting practices. Parents responded to the following questions: “How often do you rely on information from blogs or sites on the Internet in your parenting role” and “How often do you rely on information from SNS in your parenting role?” Response options ranged from 1 (*Almost never/Never*) to 4 (*Always/Almost always*).

Parents’ difficulties in dealing with online information

Four questions measured parents’ difficulties in dealing with online parenting related information. These questions were based on results from earlier qualitative studies (e.g., Strange et al., 2018; Valan et al., 2018) and were developed in purpose of getting more knowledge about parents’ troubles in dealing with information online that is confusing, stressful, and contrasting. The four questions were: “Do you normally find information online concerning parenting or children that makes you confused,” “Does it happen that you find information online that concerns the same aspect, but that suggest different solutions,” “Does it happen that you find so much information online about something concerning your parenting role that you are not able to prioritize what information is most relevant,” and “Does it happen that you get stressed about the information you find online?” For these questions, parents were reminded that the questions dealt with information specific to their parenting role or their children, not information in general. Response options ranged from 1 (*Almost never or Never*) to 4 (*Almost always or Always*). These four questions made up a composite scale, and the Cronbach alpha was .70.

Statistical analyses

We ran multiple regression analyses using demographic variables to predict parents’ online activities. This was done for all the activities and interpretation and reliance of online information separately. To control for the potential impact of recruitment method of participants (online versus offline), we included this variable as a covariate in all analyses. All predictors were entered together in the same step, and, thus, the results are all unique associations while at the same time controlling for the predictive effect of the other variables. In total, then, we performed nine multiple regression analyses with seven predictors in each. All analyses were performed with SPSS version 25.0 IBM Corp (2017).

Results

Descriptive statistics

In Table 1, we present descriptive statistics. Most of the parents used SNS every day (31%) or several times a day (58%). Only 0.7% reported that they did not use it at all. The most common activities online were searching for information concerning parenting or children ($M = 2.83$; $SD = 0.97$) and reading parenting blogs ($M = 2.80$; $SD = 1.43$). Most parents reported that they searched for information online every week (33%) or every month (39%). Additionally, 19% reported that they read parenting blogs every week and 23% reported that they did so every month. The least common activity was writing blog with only 3% parents reporting doing this. Concerning posting on SNS, 47% of the parents reported that they posted pictures of their children at least once a month and 38% reported that they wrote things on SNS concerning their child or parenting role once a month.

Table 2 reports on the correlations among the study variables. Parents who reported much SNS use in general also reported being more involved in almost all parenting-specific online activities compared with parents who used SNS to a lesser degree. Parents who read parenting blogs and parents who searched for parenting related information online were more likely to rely on the Internet in their parenting. Parents who used the Internet to search for parenting related information, read parenting blogs, or who relied on the Internet or SNS in their parenting role, had more troubles dealing with information that they retrieved online.

Demographic differences on the online activities

The results of the regression analyses in which we examined demographic variables as predictors of online activities are reported in Table 3. Four of the six predictors were significant: Parents' gender, parents' education, the child's age, and number of children. Most significant results were found for parents' gender. Specifically, mothers reported that they used SNS ($\beta = .13$, $p = .008$), posted photos of their child on SNS ($\beta = .14$, $p = .008$), posted information

Table 2. Correlations among study variables.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. SNS use	.								
2. Photos on SNS	.30**	.							
3. Info on SNS	.20**	.64**	.						
4. Reading blogs	.17**	-.04	-.07	.					
5. Search for information	.14**	.10*	.06	.37**	.				
6. Writing blog	-.04	.08	.07	.01	.05	.			
7. Rely on Internet	.13**	-.01	.07	.25**	.21**	.12*	.		
8. Rely on SNS	.19**	.12*	.20**	.12*	.14**	.06	.48**	.	
9. Dealing with online info	.09	-.02	.04	.21**	.22**	.05	.18**	.20**	.

Rely on = what sources of information parents rely on in their parenting role. SNS = Social Networking Sites. $N = 401$.

Table 3. Results using demographic variables to predict online activities.

Online activity	Predictors												R ²
	Parents' age		Parents' gender		Education		Child's age		Number of children		Born in Sweden or not		
	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p	
Use of SNS	.05	.420	.13	.008	.03	.599	-.03	.539	.00	.975	.03	.615	.034
Photos on SNS	.03	.660	.14	.008	-.16	.003	-.04	.394	.00	.997	.03	.563	.035
Info on SNS	.10	.078	.13	.009	-.21	<.001	.03	.623	-.03	.519	.07	.149	.049
Reading blogs	-.05	.301	.30	<.001	.19	<.001	-.11	.024	.03	.567	-.02	.636	.195
Search for information	.03	.548	.20	<.001	.03	.522	-.29	<.001	-.10	.041	-.03	.534	.150
Writing blogs	.02	.773	-.04	.429	-.09	.089	.02	.729	.10	.043	.04	.455	.027
Dealing with online info	.04	.451	.17	<.001	-.06	.299	-.04	.455	-.11	.031	-.01	.901	.051
Relying on info from ...													
Internet	.05	.406	.15	.003	.02	.771	-.06	.227	.00	.988	.03	.538	.043
SNS	.08	.178	.19	<.001	-.09	.103	.03	.624	-.05	.294	.02	.751	.044

Relying on = what sources of information parents rely on in their parenting role. SNS = Social Network Sites. Results are standardized betas. In the analyses, we controlled for method of recruitment of participants (online versus offline). Parents' gender: 1 = fathers, 2 = mothers; Born in Sweden: 1 = Yes, 2 = No. *N* = 401.

about their child or parenting role on SNS ($\beta = .13, p = .009$), read parenting blogs ($\beta = .30, p < .001$), and searched for online information related to parenting or children ($\beta = .20, p < .001$) more so than did fathers. For parents' education, parents with lower education posted more photos and shared more information on SNS ($\beta = -.16, p = .003$; $\beta = -.21, p < .001$, for posting photos and information, respectively), but they read parenting blogs to a lower extent ($\beta = .19, p < .001$) than parents with higher education. Further, parents of younger children read parenting blogs ($\beta = -.11, p = .024$) and searched for parenting related information online ($\beta = -.29, p < .001$) more so than did parents of older children. Finally, it was more common that parents who had more children wrote their own blog ($\beta = .10, p = .034$), but they reported searching less for information online ($\beta = -.10, p = .041$) than parents with fewer children. Whether parents were born in Sweden or not and parents' age were not significant predictors of online activities.

Source of information and experiences with online information

Parents differed on their experiences of dealing with and reliance on information depending on the parents' gender, child's age, and parents' age (see Table 3). Concerning parents' gender, mothers reported relying on information from the Internet ($\beta = .15, p = .003$) and SNS ($\beta = .19, p < .001$) more so than did fathers ($M = 1.60, SD = 0.62$; $M = 1.43, SD = 0.53$; and $M = 2.66, SD = 0.61$). Mothers and parents who had fewer children reported significantly more troubles dealing with information they retrieved online than did fathers ($\beta = .19, p < .001$) and parents who had more children ($\beta = -.11, p = .031$), respectively. Parents' education and whether parents were born in Sweden or not were not significant predictors.

Discussion

This study corroborates the findings of prior research showing that parents are active users of the Internet and SNS. However, this study showed that there are substantial variations in what parents do, their difficulties in dealing with the information they retrieve online, and how much they relied on the Internet and SNS in their parenting role. As have been suggested by theory (Schroeder, 2018), technology is a common resource for parents in the parenting role and in their everyday life, with searching information as the most common online activity. This is in line with earlier studies on parents living in Western countries (Lupton et al., 2016), suggesting that parents find inspiration on certain parenting related aspects online, which might influence their subsequent behaviors. In general, parents' gender, education, number of children, and children's age were demographic variables of most importance to explain differences in parents' online activities, and their experiences of dealing with and using online information. These results follow general patterns in the society with younger people and females using the Internet more often than their counterparts (Fox & Rainie, 2000; Jones & Fox, 2009), and are discussed below with a specific connection to the parenting role.

Parents' gender

Parents' gender was the most important factor to explain variations in type of online activity. These results, however, should be interpreted with caution because there was an unequal number of mothers and fathers in our sample, and the absolute number of fathers was low. With this in mind, however, the results suggested that mothers used SNS, posted photos and other content of their child on SNS, read parenting blogs, and searched for online information related to parenting or children more so than fathers. This is consistent with earlier studies (e.g., Laws et al., 2019; Radey & Randolph, 2009), and in accordance with our first hypothesis. This study also expanded on earlier studies in that we examined how much parents relied on online information and their ways of dealing with such information. Specifically, mothers reported relying more on online information, but they also reported more troubles dealing with the information they retrieved online than did fathers. Hence, not only did the results suggest that mothers and fathers differ on what they did online, they also seemed to differ in how much they relied on online information and their difficulties in making use of this information. These results can be explained by the fact that mothers are more active online and, thus, are more likely to face information that is confusing, contrasting, or distressing. Additionally, mothers often experience higher societal demands on doing "correct" in their parenting role and being a "good" parent (mother) than are fathers (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Lundqvist et al., 2017;

Tryggvason et al., 2012), and mothers might believe that retrieving information from several sources can increase the likelihood to live up to these demands. Knowing more about how fathers and mothers interpret online information might shed light into these differences.

Parents' education

In this study, we examined parents' activities on SNS – in addition to searching for information and reading blogs – and the inclusion of multiple activities offered a different, and more nuanced, pattern concerning educational differences compared with earlier research (Laws et al., 2019; Radey & Randolph, 2009). Specifically, parents with higher education read parenting blogs more often than did parents with lower education, but parents with lower education were more active on SNS than were parents with higher education. Based on ideas of a digital divide (Bonfadelli, 2002), as well as results from a few studies (Radey & Randolph, 2009; Rotbaum et al., 2008), we had expected that parents with higher education would use the Internet to find parenting related information more so than parents with higher education. This hypothesis was partly supported. Parents with higher education did use blogs as a source of information more than parents with lower education. Hence, to some extent these results supported the idea that parents with higher education used the Internet to gain more information on parenting related issues than did parents with lower education. There was, however, no significant effect of education on parents' use of the Internet to search for parenting information (e.g., using search engines or parenting websites). These results suggest the importance of separating *how* parents use the Internet to find information about parenting, as the procedure and platform might vary between parent groups.

Interestingly, parents with lower education posted photos and wrote things connected to their child or parenting role more so than parents with higher education. The perceived societal pressure to share information of children might be strong among parents in general, although many parents might be critical to share such information (Siibak & Traks, 2019). However, parents might deal with the societal pressure in different ways. Parents with higher education might place more importance on the possible consequences of posting things online – connected to the right of the child's personal integrity – and this might explain less “sharenting.” The balance between parents' willing to share photos of their children and their worries about the “digital footprints” that comes with such sharing was recently discussed in a qualitative study of middle-class mothers (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). It is possible that the difference as a function of education in our study indicates differences in how parents come to deal with this balance. In fact, education tend to improve people's general cognitive skills, including critical thinking skills and decision-making abilities (Harvey, 2000). Parents with higher education might

conclude that the child's right to privacy is more important than their own willing to share information. Alternatively, there might be a difference in norms concerning good parenthood as a function of class (Alstam, 2016). Specifically, parents with higher education might be more concerned about their self-presentation and the negative perception of themselves as parents if they expose their children too much online. Hence, these parents might not only be concerned with the right of the child, but also about their own image as parents. These are post-hoc explanations and need to be tested empirically in future research.

Children's age and number of children

Parents with younger children were more frequent users of the Internet to find information about parenting related issues (both searching for information and reading parenting blogs) in comparison to parents of older children. This is consistent with earlier research on parents' use of the Internet to find information (Baker et al., 2017; Radey & Randolph, 2009) and on their use of SNS (Baker et al., 2017). For parents of younger children, it is likely that they are in an early phase of identifying as parents. The Internet often plays an important role in the transition to parenthood (Madge & O'connor, 2006), as getting different opinions and suggestions might help in the identity formation process (Plantin & Daneback, 2010). Additionally, as many parents of younger children are on parental leave, they spend more time at home with their children than parents of older children, and, thus, might be in specific need of information related to their everyday parenting practices. We did not find evidence that parents of younger children posted more content on their children on SNS than did parents of older children, which we hypothesized in line with earlier research (Baker et al., 2017). It should be acknowledged, however, that all parents in the sample had quite young children, so there is a need to be careful in drawing conclusions about parents of "older children." In fact, the study by Baker et al. (2017) used parents of children ages 2 to 12, which was an older sample than we used in this study. It is possible that differences in the use of SNS as a function of the child's age appears when comparing parents of toddlers and preschoolers with parents of children in school-age.

In this study, we hypothesized that parents who had fewer children would search more for information online in comparison to parents who had more children. This hypothesis was supported. It is possible that parents who have fewer children have less experiences to learn from (Lam et al., 2012), and might, therefore, turn to the Internet to find relevant information. In addition, the results suggested that parents who had fewer children reported more troubles in dealing with online information than parents who had more children. These two results are probably related in such that fewer parenting

experiences makes parents search for more information, but fewer parenting experiences also makes it more difficult to understand and discern different perspectives and ideas.

Parents' age

In this study, we hypothesized that younger parents would use the Internet and SNS more so than older parents, but that they would have more troubles dealing with the online information they retrieved. These hypotheses were not supported by the data. In fact, parents' age was not a significant predictor for any of the variables used in this study. It should be noted that parents' age, children's age, and number of children are highly interrelated. But as these variables are entered at the same time, the results represent unique effects on online activities. Hence, parents' age, in comparison to children's age and number of children, was of less importance for variations in parents' use of the Internet in finding information. The lack of significant result in this study is particularly important to mention, as this contrast earlier research in which younger people often feel more comfortable in using the Internet as a source of information (Ruggiero, 2000). In our study, however, parents were between 26 and 39 years, and it is possible that all these parents are considered to have high Internet literacy. Including parents who are older than 39 and younger than 26 might have given a different result.

Strengths and limitations

This study has some limitations that need to be addressed. The sample included few fathers and parents who were born outside of Sweden, thus, making the sample homogeneous on these variables. Regarding gender, active attempts were made to recruit an equal number of mothers and fathers (e.g., advertising on parenting forums and groups that were specifically targeting fathers, visiting family centers with groups for fathers), but we did not succeed in recruiting as many fathers as mothers. Additionally, the absolute number of fathers were also low, and this might have resulted in potential issues with power and generalizability. This is unfortunate, but not unique to this project. Importantly, though, it is possible that the patterns found in this study are more applicable to mothers and Swedish born parents, as these made up the majority of the sample. As gender was the most prominent demographic predictor, these differences should be interpreted with caution and need to be tested using a sample with more equal numbers of fathers and mothers. Further, we used a nonrandom sample. Although all parents who visited the family centers or the online sites on which we advertised about the project had the opportunity to participate, this is not a completely randomized sample. Our sample, however, did not differ that much in demographics from national

data on parents of children below the age of 5, making us comfortable generalizing to this parent group in Sweden. Finally, the online recruitment resulted in a higher number of parents than the offline recruitment. Ultimately, it would have been good to have equal numbers of parents from these recruitment strategies, but unfortunately, this was not the case. Although this might be a limitation, research has shown that different data collection strategies do not present different results (Wright, 2020), and our samples did not differ considerably as a result of recruitment strategy. However, the results of this study need to be interpreted with the skewed data in mind.

Another limitation concerns the lack of distinction in our data between parenting sites online that involves advice given by experts and sites without a connection to experts. Many parents use the Internet to search for parenting related information, but they do so only on websites that are operated by trustworthy actors (such as the government) whereas other parents might use a larger variety of sites that are operated by both the state and by private actors. In our study, we were not able to distinguish between such sites, which is a limitation and should be examined in future studies. This is especially important as people tend to search for different types of content on different online sites (Schroeder, 2018). As a final limitation, the predictive power of the variables in our analyses is quite low, especially for some of the dependent variables. It is obvious that demographic factors cannot explain the full picture of parents' use of the Internet and SNS. Other variables, such as parents' beliefs and personality, or level of anxiety might explain how parents use the Internet or how much content they share on SNS. For example, insecurity in parents have been raised as an issue in relation to their use of the Internet (Valan et al., 2018). It is possible that parents who doubt their parenting competence use the Internet more to search for information or use SNS to get validation in their parenting role more so than parents who have more confidence in their parenting role. It is important that future research examine other potential predictors for parents' use of the Internet.

Some aspects strengthen this study. First, because this study uses multiple demographic variables as predictors of differences in online activities, it goes beyond earlier research and presents a more comprehensive picture of parents' use of the Internet and SNS. Additionally, it is one of the first studies examining parents in Sweden, and, thus, has implications for research in this cultural context. Second, in this study, we developed a measure of parents' interpretation of online information, which allowed examinations of subgroups of parents who experience more troubles dealing with online information. Specifically, this measure dealt with parents' experiences regarding information online that they found confusing, stressful, and sometimes contrasting. Earlier studies have shown indications of this among parents but testing this in a larger sample with a measure developed specifically to measure this concept is a strength of this study. Third, we used earlier research when we

constructed the list of online activities (Lupton et al., 2016). However, we also gave parents the opportunity to list any additional activities that they were involved in online. This was done to make sure that we captured the activities that are most meaningful for parents. Few activities, however, were identified in addition to the list of given activities, which gave us confidence that we captured the general activities that parents of children below the age of five are involved in.

Implications for practice

The results of this study offer important knowledge for practitioners who support parents in their use of the Internet and SNS. The most important take-home message of this study is that although most parents use the Internet, parents differ in the way they use Internet and SNS, as well in what extent they use it. For parents who share much child-related information on SNS, it might be important for practitioners to help parents reflect on these decisions. Specifically, practitioners should discuss with parents about the child's privacy. Perhaps practitioners can ask parents to reflect on the balance between the need of self-representation and the child's right to integrity, as well as the "digital footprint" of information online (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). In Sweden, the UN convention of the right of the child became a law in January 2020. This law puts emphasis on the right of the children, and it is important to inform parents and help them to reflect on their own actions related to their children. One part of this concerns sharing information about their children online. For mothers and parents of younger children, which, to some extent, might be the same group, advice and support can focus on the sources of information that they rely on. Practitioners should guide parents on how to use the most reliable sources to seek online information. In Sweden, where most parents visit governmental-run childcare centers, this might to some extent already be done. At these visits, practitioners often recommend parents to search for information on sites provided by the Swedish government (e.g., 1177.se). However, practitioners might also need to help parents to develop tools to validate and think critically about information that they retrieve elsewhere. Advising parents to use reliable online sites and to discuss other information gained elsewhere might give parents tools to find relevant information related to their parenting role.

In general, practitioners, who can be perceived as part of an "expert system" in the late modernity (Giddens, 1991), have an important role in helping parents reflect on their parenting role in relation to information and feedback they face online. This is important, as there are studies suggesting that parents of today feel less efficacious in their parenting role than parents did 15–20 years ago (Glatz & Buchanan, 2021), although they have access to more information. In Sweden, and other Western countries, in which parents have

more easy access to family centers or other healthcare providers and where parents meet “experts” on a regular basis, it might be relevant for practitioners to ask about parents’ experiences of the Internet and SNS. This is a way to identify parents who might experience more troubles online and can help parents to make use of the available online information in the best way.

Disclosure statement

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to report.

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