

Mothers find safe haven on the internet to talk about sex

July 7 2014, by Sarah Pedersen



Credit: Creativa

Who can forget "penis-beakergate"? That wonderful moment in October 2013 when a user of popular parenting site Mumsnet started a discussion thread to ask other women whether her partner's behaviour was normal. She explained that he kept a plastic beaker filled with water by the side of the bed during sex and then "dunked" his penis in afterwards to clean it.

The thread attracted hundreds of posts, and all of them assured her that this was not normal behaviour. The discussion was described in the media in terms that ranged from "bawdy" and "funny" to "sleazy" and "obscene". It soon became notorious outside the confines of the Mumsnet boards and was discussed in the [national](#) and [international](#) media.

Jenni Murray, a campaigner on issues relating to [women's](#) health and presenter of the BBC Radio 4 programme Woman's Hour, in the [Daily Mail](#) expressed her shock at the material she found on the Mumsnet discussion boards. In particular she was upset by a thread entitled: "Just wondering how often people have sex when you've been together and have kids. What's normal?"

Inspired by the media furore over "penis-beakergate", I have investigated mothers' discussion of sex online. Why were so many shocked to find mothers discussing sex online?

We don't like to think about our mothers having sex and, for many, the topics of motherhood and sexuality should be mutually exclusive. This can also be true of mothers themselves – breasts have a sexual function before birth but afterwards they have a nurturing one. Pregnancy and childbirth can bring about enormous changes in women's bodies and lives.

So where should mothers go to find sex advice? There is very little written in parenting advice books or magazines about mothers enjoying their sexuality or about the ways in which their sexual desires and concerns might change after childbirth. Women's magazines don't tend to cover such topics, apart from coverage of "yummy mummy" celebrities who have regained their pre-pregnancy figures and their desirability swiftly. Midwives and doctors will offer advice about contraception and initial, post-partum sex, but not long-term

adjustments.

The internet, therefore, is a venue where mothers can anonymously seek advice and support about sexual matters. [My research](#) suggests that, on sites such as Mumsnet, women seek advice and support from others in similar situations, attempt to establish "norms" relating to [sexual behaviour](#), and supplement information given by health professionals.

In particular, they use the site to establish what is normal and to validate their own experience as being within such a norm. Such norms might relate to frequency of sex, type of sexual experience or issues that a woman might feel embarrassed to talk about to friends or to her doctor. Online, she is able to discuss problems or experiences anonymously, or even just to read about the experiences of other mothers.

However, such discussions also appeared to have their own conventions. There were frequent mentions of "Friday threads" in such discussions, with the implication being that Friday evenings were a time when posters might have had a glass of wine and be "up for" a discussion of sex.

Interestingly, the most frequent mention of this apparently necessary stimulus tended to come in admissions that it is not Friday and yet the poster still needs to discuss sexual matters. This emphasis on the need for a particular day and particular circumstances for discussing sex reinforces wider societal assumptions about mother's and women's sexuality – that it can be compartmentalised and should only be aroused in the appropriate circumstances and after the application of alcohol – only women who have had a drink want to talk about [sex](#).

Of course, Mumsnet is not the only place for women to discuss their sexuality online. [Previous](#) research have shown that [blogging about sex](#) is [heavily dominated by women](#). Think of Belle de Jour. The key to much of this freedom online is anonymity, even though that may not protect a

woman from trolls or the world's media picking up on the content posted. It takes a certain kind of courage to seek advice on such matters online, although blog posts can be edited and discussions moderated if necessary.

Websites, such as Mumsnet, can offer a valuable venue for women who otherwise have few avenues open to them to discuss sexual matters. Society, and mothers themselves, can have problems with the idea that mothers can be sexual beings. The internet, however, offers [mothers](#) a possible place to learn from others in their situation and to openly discuss their sexuality in a way that they would not be able to do with friends or professionals.

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