Existential vulnerability and transition

Struggling with involuntary childlessness on Instagram

Kristina Stenström^I & Teresa Cerratto Pargman^{II}

^I Department of Sociology, Stockholm University, and Department of Humanities, University of Gävle, Sweden

^{II} Department of Computer and Systems Sciences, Stockholm University, Sweden

Abstract

In their efforts to find others who share their experiential reality and existential struggle, many involuntarily childless women turn to Instagram to engage and participate in the practice of trying-to-conceive (TTC) communication. Through the conceptual lens of digital existence, where the digital and online are regarded as constitutive of existential transition, we draw on ten interviews and an online ethnography to explore some of the struggles that involuntarily childless women experience with and through technology. We find that TTC communication can be constitutive of coming to terms with the status of involuntary childlessness. In particular, this study illustrates that TTC communication, for involuntarily childless women, is both a site of struggle and a safe space as they transition to nonmotherhood in an existential terrain where they share an intimate journey.

Keywords: existential media studies, involuntary childlessness, vulnerability, transition, Instagram

Introduction

As a species, we wish to share our reality with others. When we face experiences or changes in life that shake our understanding of reality and who we are, we often feel a need to reorientate and find others who genuinely comprehend our experiential reality (Pinel, 2018). In this article, we draw on the example of trying-to-conceive (TTC) communication^I on Instagram, a practice in which involuntarily childless women engage to share their experiences of infertility, uncertainty, and longing, and to find others who truly *understand*. Despite their efforts, about 15 per cent of Swedes cannot become parents and are involuntarily childless (Westerlund, 2005). Fertility issues are often not shared, even with close family or friends, because they are imbued with stigma and normative silencing (Blyth & Moore, 2001; Letherby, 1999, 2002; Miall, 1986). Due to the pain and uncertainty that involuntary childlessness (IC) is imbued with, alongside the challenges that come with social network sites' affordances, TTC communication constitutes a unique site of inquiry in which to explore struggles with digital technologies and social media.

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We view IC as a transition in life, with deeply existential implications, and we draw on Matthews and Matthews (1986), who conceptualise IC as a “transition to nonparenthood”.² These authors pinpoint the overwhelming changes in the lives of the affected as they transition “from the anticipated status of potential parenthood to the unwanted status [of ...] nonparenthood” (Matthews & Matthews, 1986: 641). In our work, we pay attention to how the construct of parenthood is highly dependent on gender, and we conceptualise TTC communication as part of a transition to “nonmotherhood” rather than “nonparenthood”. While girls grow up amid sociocultural constructs of eventual motherhood as defining femininity, fatherhood is not built as a necessity for men (Letherby, 1999, 2002; Russo, 1976). We do not suggest that IC is an issue that is only relevant to women or that men go unaffected, and previous research does show that men communicate online about fertility issues (Malik & Coulson, 2008; Patel et al., 2019); however, our analysis of TTC communication on Instagram shows that an overwhelming majority of participants are female, and this study thus accounts particularly for women’s experiences and vulnerabilities.

Previous studies show that individuals going through significant changes and transitions in life often turn to social media as part of navigating their new or changing situations (Andersson, 2019; Haimson, 2018; Haimson et al., 2019; Lagerkvist, 2017; Lagerkvist & Andersson, 2017). Digital media and online environments have also been understood as constitutive of existential processes (Durham Peters, 2015; Lagerkvist, 2017, 2018). These studies help us understand that participants in TTC communication are both users of social media and “existers” in digital arenas (Lagerkvist, 2017). Influenced by the philosophy of Karl Jaspers, Lagerkvist (2017: 101) understands existers in the digital age as “struggling, suffering, and relational human being[s]” who navigate through the existential terrains of connectivity.

In this work, we have, in particular, focused on the following research questions: How do TTC communication practices configure IC women’s transition to nonmotherhood? And, what are the specific struggles that IC women experience when participating in TTC communication practices?

We have specified two main types of struggles experienced in and through TTC communication: 1) struggling with transitioning to nonmotherhood, and 2) struggling with existing as an IC woman in TTC communication. Of particular interest here is that existing as an IC woman in TTC communication entails confronting vulnerability, uncertainty, and insecurity in disclosing private information that may be or become traceable, searchable, and quantified in terrains governed by opaque algorithmic decision-making.

In the following sections, we discuss the particularities of the experience of IC as a woman and IC as an existential process. We engage with the body of scholarship that approaches IC as a life transition. We draw on previous work focused on social media use in vulnerable life situations in the field of human-computer interaction.

Situating involuntarily childless women

When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are and what to do. On one level, I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well. (Butler, 2004: 22)

Often confronted by an existential crisis, IC women turn online and to TTC communication to look for and find previously unknown others with whom they form bonds through their shared vulnerability (Bost, 2010; Lagerkvist & Andersson, 2017). Here, we understand vulnerability through an existential, phenomenological stance. Koivunen and colleagues (2018: 4) write: “Deriving from the Latin word *vulnus* [wound], vulnerability expresses the capacity to be wounded and suffer. As bodily, social, and affective beings, we all have the capacity to be wounded and suffer”. This quote illustrates the multifaceted existential, social, and physical aspects of IC women’s vulnerability.

Previous studies have shown that emotional reactions are similar across different cultural and geographical backgrounds upon learning that one cannot conceive a biological child (Johansson & Berg, 2005), which is likely to be linked to the centrality of children and parenthood across cultures. Motherhood is viewed as a rite of passage to adult femininity, while fatherhood is not connected to similar constructs (Russo, 1976; Wells & Heinsch, 2020; Whitehead, 2016). In Sweden, the percentage of childless women increased only marginally from 12 per cent in the 1980s to 13–14 per cent in 2010, while 21 per cent of men were childless in 2008 (Persson, 2010). Although fewer men have children and men have fertility issues to the same degree as women, childlessness is continuously constructed as a “female problem”, both physically and emotionally. Unlike childless men, childless women are continually assumed to be *involuntarily* childless, and both voluntarily (Bays, 2017; Harrington, 2019; Lisle, 1999; Park, 2002) and involuntarily childless women (Letherby, 2002; Miall, 1986) are constructed as flawed or lacking (Bell, 2013; Loftus & Andriot, 2012; Mahoney Tsigdinos, 2009; Strif, 2005). IC women often self-label as “failures” and routinely experience stigmatisation (Miall, 1986).

Against this background, societal constructs of stigmatisation and silence, and the experience of existential longing and uncertainty, configure women’s life transition in coming to terms with IC, both online and offline.

Understanding involuntary childlessness as a limit-situation and life transition through social media

Transitioning to nonmotherhood is an instance of what psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers called “limit-situations”, referring to those life-defining moments related to death, loss, conflict, suffering, and guilt, where one is confronted to take charge of one’s life and give it form (in Lagerkvist, 2017). In contrast to events of loss or change that may be more tangible to those surrounding affected individuals, our study draws on material that brings a different perspective to a limit-situation and life transition born from that which is *yet to happen* or *did not occur*.

Previous studies on the use of social media during IC (Harrison, 2014; Stenström, 2020; Whitehead, 2016) and fertility treatments (Johnson et al., 2019; Strif, 2005) indicate that social media are used to raise awareness, resist dominant narratives about IC, and function as ways to exchange mutual support. Studies focusing on other vulnerable groups and transitions in life, such as gender transition (Haimson et al., 2015, 2016), chronic illness (Isika et al., 2020; Sannon et al., 2019), or mental illness (Feuston & Piper, 2019) suggest that social media platforms and their affordances are used to cope and facilitate life transition. Participants engaged in sensitive communication about

painful or stigmatising experiences typically motivate their platform choices through affordances that allow compartmentalisation and segmenting of accounts and audiences (Andalibi & Forte, 2018; Isika et al., 2020). This relates to the social pressures participants experience, which demand them to present positive content on their “regular” social media accounts. For instance, Sannon and colleagues (2019) focused on how individuals who have invisible chronic illnesses discuss using different platforms to come to terms with their “chronic, stigmatised identity”. Drawing on the concept of liminality (Gennep, 1909), Haimson (2018) argues that individuals going through gender transition use social media as social transition machinery as they simultaneously present different versions of themselves to various networks. In this way, Haimson (2018) argues, social media facilitate life transition. These studies, focused on human-computer interaction, also inform about participants’ careful management of disclosure and privacy as they continuously change privacy settings, tailor feeds and seek topical visibility.

Focusing on communication *practices* in specific contexts of suffering and support, instead of human-computer interactions, Stage and Hougaard (2018) studied Facebook groups created to support and subsequently commemorate children with terminal cancer. They found that affective language – which is not primarily understood as spoken or written words, but as interjections, emojis, likes, or acts of lighting digital candles – forms what the authors call “new affective publics”. This type of communication practices points specifically to the affective body and nonverbal cues such as crying emojis or interjections such as “Oh” that bring those who engage in such communication practices together. These studies all point to the entanglement of social networks with social and private identities through their combined focus on platform affordances and practices relating to instances of loss, confusion, and transition. In this sense, we consider social media as existential media (Lagerkvist, 2017). Far from only working as a communication tool, social media use in limit-situations become part and parcel of who we are and become.

In contrast, studies have suggested that certain modes of social media use only render positive and highly-selected representations of life (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015; Le Moignan et al., 2017). Le Moignan and colleagues (2017) suggest that Instagram is used as a modern continuation of the family album, where “evidence of good parenting” is presented and where any ambiguous or negative content concerning the family unit is usually avoided. The study conducted by Le Moignan and colleagues (2017) was based on material found through hashtag searches. Given that hashtag searches on Instagram will only present posts openly accessible to anyone, the authors were unlikely to find highly sensitive or ambiguous material. We argue that in order to account for and analyse sensitive and painful life experiences in and through social media, we must understand and explore the varying and layered communication practices that are put to use during crisis and transition. This can be done by acknowledging that the same platforms may involve a multitude of contrasting modes of use, created and maintained by different individuals and groups of users.

Summarising, these studies illustrate that the use and design of digital platforms configure new and various communication practices (Hansson et al., 2018; Cerratto Pargman, 2006). However, they facilitate much more than social communication as they impact one’s existence (Lagerkvist, 2017). Our study builds on this conceptual foundation. In particular, our work extends and complements this body of work by focusing on digital existential transition, which we introduce in the next section.

Digital existence and involuntary childlessness as a life transition

When women turn to social media searching for existential security during IC transition work, their life transitions become shaped in, by, and through digital media forms (see Lagerkvist, 2017). As such, “the quest for existential security can involve the mundane struggle of trying to regain control within our data-driven lives. But it may also involve both this-worldly and otherworldly aspects of profundity, meaning, and/or spirituality and the sacred” (Lagerkvist, 2017: 102). In this study, we take the lens of digital existence to better understand how life transition work is done in contexts saturated by digital media and online environments (Lagerkvist, 2017; Van Dijck, 2013). We view that TTC communication manifests social media as a site of struggle – where people in vulnerable situations emerge as existers to find security and meaning. To better understand social media use as a site of struggle and users as *existers*, we draw on the three dimensions of reality reconstruction, identity transformation, and role adjustment, which Matthews and Matthews (1986) identify as central in transitioning to nonparenthood.

Reality reconstruction entails the “redefinition” that IC couples and individuals face regarding themselves and their realities as they realise that previous plans and hopes may not come true. According to Matthews and Matthews (1986: 643), reality reconstruction is often initiated when the subjective knowledge about fertility issues is shared with others, such as medical professionals, and thus becomes “objectively real”. How reality reconstruction plays out depends on the duration of IC and possible treatments, how a couple constructs their situation, and how aligned they are in that construct. Those who are permanently most affected either learn that they are sterile or remain childless without a reason being found. A substantial reconstruction can only happen when one has a child or comes to terms with no longer trying for children. Many live for years in uncertainty about whether they may still have children one day, which also confronts them in finding existential meaning concerning childlessness. The affected are also influenced by significant other people’s responses, as they are essential in “defining” the objective reality of one’s situation. At times, subjective and objective realities are not aligned because others may have expectations and hopes regarding IC individuals having children.

Identity transformation entails the influence of IC on the self-concept and identity of those affected: “the greater the commitment to biological parenthood, the greater will be the identity shock brought about by infertility and involuntary childlessness” (Matthews & Matthews, 1986: 646). IC women often self-label as stigmatised or deviant (Miall, 1986). Matthews and Matthews (1986: 646) refer to Stone (1962, 1981), who claims that identity is continuously “announced” through discourse and appearance. One complicating factor regarding IC is that it is not readily apparent to others. The involuntarily childless are thus required to decide who to tell and when, and they often face outside expectations to explain their situation, and in a sense, “excuse” the absence of children.

There is a close connection between identity and role relationships that can be better understood via the concept of role adjustment. Role adjustment describes the change in the social roles that the involuntarily childless have with others. Identity transformation is connected to role relationships through identification, identifying those *different* from oneself, and identifying *with* those regarded as *similar*. Identifications are readjusted following IC. The timing of role adjustment varies depending on the timing of diagnosis and possible treatments.

Instagram as a TTC platform

As discussed previously, participants in the present study make informed decisions regarding platform choice, stressing Instagram affordances (e.g., anonymity, tailoring their communities, and unfiltered communication) as motivating their choice. Further, the participants routinely move between Instagram accounts created for different reasons. This resonates with earlier studies on sensitive communication on Instagram (Isika et al., 2020). The participants find that Instagram offers a particular kind of anonymity regarding face-to-face networks that simultaneously allows for a sense of intimacy and control over anonymity within the TTC community. While the participants might turn to discussion boards such as Reddit (Ammari et al., 2019) to anonymously discuss infertility, they express that the sense of intimacy and familiarity experienced on Instagram is often missing in other online settings. While Facebook also offers support groups for IC, this platform does not allow participants to choose or remove other members if they join an existing group. In contrast, Instagram allows precise control of each followed account and any account permitted to follow shared posts. We interpret the combination of intimacy and anonymity that Instagram offers as paramount concerning identity transformation and role adjustment in the case study here.

Methodology

This study has approached TTC communication practices through interviews with participating women and an online ethnography on Instagram. The collected material has been analysed thematically.

Ethics

Because IC can be an emotional trauma, particular caution was taken when approaching those affected. To ensure respect for persons (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018), Kristina was careful to inform both the interviewees and the followed accounts on Instagram about her research purposes and interests. To ensure that the participants consented to the use of any collected material, she made the transcribed interviews and exact quotes available to the participants, who were offered the opportunity to clarify, change, or retract any part of their participation. Because of the possible vulnerability of subjects and the sensitivity of the matter and giving the participants adequate time and possibility to make informed decisions about participation, the interviewees were most often presented themes and questions before interviews. All participants were informed that they could retract their involvement at any point in time.

When writing up, the collected material has been anonymised through what Bruckman (2002) delineates as “moderate disguise” to protect respondents. In our study, this entails that online pseudonyms are not revealed but that quotes are used verbatim after translation from Swedish to English, which offers some further disguise. The fact that the Instagram accounts included in the study are often private (the account holder’s approval is required to follow the account) and that the quotes are translated complicates any attempt to trace original accounts through online searches (for instance). A risk remains that other participants in TTC communication could recognise and identify specific posts that they have seen in community communication; however, the risk of individuals

outside of TTC communication identifying subjects is very slim. The material produced has not been circulated beyond a limited circle of researchers and was anonymised even then. Moreover, this study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

Interviews

During 2017–2019, ten women active in TTC communication on Instagram were each interviewed by Kristina for about two hours through a semistructured (Trost, 2010) procedure. Interviewed TTC participants were presented with questions focusing on the meaning and value of TTC communication and practical matters, such as frequency of use and privacy settings. Interviewees were encouraged to formulate their main concerns and interests and narrate their own experiences of TTC communication. All of the interviews were conducted in Swedish, recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis by Kristina. Quotes were translated to English by Kristina for this article.

The interviewees were found among those who had agreed to make their TTC account available for research purposes. They were approached through private Instagram messages with a request for an interview. Some of the participants were added through snowball sampling through the recommendations of previous participants. No specific requirements for selection were set concerning the number of posts or the period for which the participants should have been active in TTC communication. However, active and recent use of the TTC account was required. All interviewees were women in their mid- to late-20s or early-30s, with one woman in her mid-40s, and all were affected by primary childlessness.

Online ethnography on Instagram

To explore TTC communication and related practices, Kristina created an Instagram account for research purposes, which presented her full name, the purpose of the account, university affiliation, research interests, and contact information. This procedure was chosen to access and address specificities in regards to TTC communication through informed consent. Because of the sensitive nature of TTC communication, accounts used to communicate are often anonymous and private (with approval required from the account holder to be accessed and followed). Supposing that only hashtag searches (Le Moignan et al. 2017) would have been used, only posts open to anyone could have been accessed, probably omitting important nuances and characteristics of TTC communication.

Kristina added TTC-themed accounts that used the Swedish language, whereafter, a built-in feature of Instagram suggested other Swedish-language TTC accounts based on previously followed accounts. Nearly all of the suggestions and followed accounts belong to women, reflecting the overwhelming majority of women actively participating. The sample of online material consisted of approximately 275 Instagram accounts, the number of which increased during the 18 months (2018–2020) they were followed. The research account also followed hashtags related to IC.

The analysis has focused on participants' written content, a decision based on how Instagram is used in TTC communication. Although Instagram is designed as an image-sharing tool, it is not primarily used as such in TTC communication. Instead, images illustrate lengthy texts rather than the other way around. Furthermore, participants stress

other affordances than image sharing, motivating their platform choice. Although images are not explicitly analysed, we acknowledge their importance and contribution to the overall tone of posts, which may have impacted our interpretations during analysis.

Thematic analysis

To analyse the collected data, a combination of inductive and deductive approaches was chosen for this study. As this study is part of a two-year postdoc project, Kristina acquired familiarity with the material through the collection process, lengthy immersion into TTC communication, transcription of interviews, and the previous coding of both online material and interviews performed for a different study (Stenström, 2020). According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 86), the collection of data and immersion into the research context entails the first phase of analysis as “patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest” are identified. Beyond acquiring familiarity with and immersion into TTC communication during daily visits, Kristina took notes and screenshots, resulting in approximately 180 screenshots collected into different online folders. These collected posts and notes represented broader themes and characteristics of the material as a whole. Transcribed interviews were colour-coded according to themes. The entire material of posts, notes, and interviews resulted in six initial codes: 1) Journey, process, identity, existence; 2) public, private, distance, closeness; 3) negative feedback and consequences; 4) community and norms; 5) digital technology and affordances; and 6) gender roles and stereotypes.

We were inspired by a “hybrid approach” to thematic analysis during the next phase of analysis that incorporates data-driven inductive coding and a deductive template of a priori codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Kristina did the thematic analysis in consultation with Teresa. Whereas the coding performed served as the inductive component, the template based on the overall themes presented by Matthews and Matthews (1986) – namely reality reconstruction, identity transformation, and role adjustment central to IC as a life transition – was used for deductive analysis. Matthews and Matthews (1986) provided an analytical frame to approach IC as a life transition, useful for our purposes. At the same time, inductive coding allowed those further dimensions and facets unique to the online setting to emerge. The coding was done iteratively and recurrently, carefully reading and rereading the material and identifying recurrent ideas and issues therein – as suggested by Vaismoradi and colleagues (2016) and Braun and Clarke (2006). The coding consisted of first identifying categories, as described by Vaismoradi and colleagues (2016). These categories were understood as the descriptive and explicit manifestation of the participants’ accounts. Second, we developed semantic themes and subthemes through interpretation. For example, for the category “need for anonymity”, we identified the subthemes “existential belonging” and “identity transformation”. Third, following Aronson (1995), we developed a “storyline” where “themes that emerge from the informants’ stories are pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience”.

Findings – TTC communication as a site of struggle and life transition

As IC women engage in TTC communication, they do so as existers amid an existential crisis and process that may last for years. As Haimson and colleagues' (Haimson, 2018; Haimson et al., 2019) studies on transition work online suggest, there is a need to differentiate between life *events* and *processes* to fully understand the complex nature of life transitions. While some changes can be traced to specific dates, other shifts are more processual, such as what we here conceptualise as the "transition to nonmotherhood". Building on the description provided by Matthews and Matthews (1986) on the "transition to nonparenthood", we make use of the main categories of reality reconstruction, identity transformation, and role adjustment to explain and be sensitive to the particular complexities, as well as temporal and processual dimensions of IC as a case. Given that we explore the transition to nonmotherhood in TTC communication, we identify and discuss three primary facets that the perspective of digital existence brings to the fore: first, we regard the life transition to IC and nonmotherhood as deeply existential; second, we find that online TTC communication reflects and configures that transition and women's search for existential security (Lagerkvist, 2017); and finally, we discuss how IC's gendered aspects become apparent in TTC communication, given that almost all who engage are women.

Reality reconstruction

Our findings indicate that TTC communication is driven by and configures the reality reconstruction process that IC women grapple with. We argue that TTC communication practices are an essential part of how the subjective reality of IC becomes objectively real for women who engage. Matthews and Matthews (1986: 645) note that because IC is often not shared with others, subjective and objective realities are often not aligned. They further identify instances of seeking medical treatment for infertility or communicating with "significant other people" about infertility issues as critical instances of accepting infertility as "objectively real". The sense of exclusion or lack of connection with face-to-face networks (e.g., friends, family, and co-workers) regarding IC is often addressed in Instagram posts. The interviewees report that normative pressure – such as expressing feelings of happiness, and withholding their sense of grief or bitterness, when pregnancies and births are announced – follow them into the online realm (e.g., pregnancy announcements are made in social media channels). In their efforts to find online outlets without this social pressure, IC women turn to TTC communication. Reality reconstruction motivates participation in TTC communication practices as women seek to align their subjective realities with those of others. Women take measures to protect the TTC environment from "significant others" in their face-to-face networks, to vent and share anonymously that which cannot be shared offline. Instead, other TTC participants may function as "significant others" when shared experiences allow realities to align, which in turn fends off feelings of existential isolation (Pinel, 2018), as indicated in the below Instagram posts:

I feel so alone and excluded like I'm the only one in my inner circle who does not have children.

I'm glad that I've had this account and learned so much about miscarriages and IVF.

TTC communication configures reality reconstruction. Some control is asserted over the new reality constructed as TTC communication on Instagram allows women to regulate what kind and how much information they receive and share through their accounts. Notably, the participants stress the importance of avoiding *receiving* certain information as motivating the engagement in TTC communication. In choosing only to follow others going through the same experiences, a digital reality reconstruction of sorts is created by avoiding the “pregnant other” (Sawyer, 2019). From Instagram content and interviews, we can see that creating a separate TTC account often forms the first measure in participants’ efforts to shield themselves from unwanted information and thus address and prevent reminders and pressures relating to pregnancies and children. One particularly challenging aspect of IC and the alignment of subjective and objective realities is that unaffected networks or significant others sometimes fail to realise the magnitude of the experience for those affected, even if those affected share their experience. While others may fail to understand because, to them, “nothing has happened”, those affected face a crisis as their realities and self-concept are overturned. TTC communication does not solve IC’s pain, and it cannot entirely replace contacts in the offline realm. However, the participants describe it as a unique and essential sphere, where they may experience that their reality aligns with the reality of others, which helps them deal with their definite reality reconstruction in regards to IC.

Identity transformation

Matthews and Matthews (1986: 645) argue that the realisation that it will be challenging to have children, and even facing the possibility that one never will, can cause an “identity shock” if the prospect of parenthood has previously been part of one’s self-concept. According to Miall (1986), infertility or IC causes women especially to self-label as “failures”, even without any negative feedback from others, although negative feedback is what usually causes individuals to self-label as stigmatised. However, we argue that it is difficult to tell how women identify or perceive “negative feedback”. Societal pressures and expectations can probably be subtle but clear to girls and women throughout their lives without having been subject to explicit negative or suggestive comments.

As discussed earlier, women often engage in TTC communication to share and understand their situation with others they regard as similar. Women’s engagement and participation in TTC communication are processual, and they usually immerse gradually. Often, the first step is coming across TTC discussions on Instagram when looking for answers or knowledge about IC or fertility issues online. Beyond the considerable number of accounts dealing with IC on the Instagram platform, the possibility to take part without disclosing presence or leaving any traces is frequently a decisive factor in choosing Instagram as a platform for TTC communication. The next step in taking part is creating an (often anonymous and pseudonymous) account that deals solely with TTC issues. After some time, women often reveal more information about themselves, such as their real name, identifying photos, or details about their treatments or diagnoses. This gradual approach speaks of these women’s efforts not to disclose any information about their state or their experience as IC to unintended audiences. However, we argue that it also speaks of a gradual transformation of identity and belonging. Creating a separate TTC account reflects a reformulation of identity, which is further signalled through the

username and presentation text, which are often articulated to indicate the account's purpose and community belonging. Identifications are further signalled through the use of abbreviations and information that is commonly used in TTC-oriented communication. Names often include "ttc" or other clues hinting at the wish for children or diagnoses that affect fertility. Presentation texts often provide further and more specific information about the TTC status of the participants, such as the time that has passed since the individual or couple started their efforts to have a child, how many and what kind of treatments they have undergone, what possible diagnoses they have received, or how many frozen embryos treatments have given them.

Participants also often engage in what Stage and Hougaard (2018) term "affective language", solidifying belonging and intimacy. Emojis depicting hearts or broken hearts are used to mark the modality of posts or comments and express empathy, grief, or joy. Face emojis are used to bring facets of bodily or facial expressions that are part of face-to-face communication into the digital realm. These affective cues – and engaged comments that express sympathy, understanding, and recognition – are significant in how TTC communication both expresses and configures identity transformation as a vehicle for affective outlet and engagement.

What is further significant is how the participants explain that they have often permanently changed once they have identified as IC. Even after having successful treatment and children, many women experience a lingering feeling of still identifying with IC others. For instance, the following excerpt illustrates this observation. A woman who became pregnant after several rounds of IVF, and at the time was 12 weeks pregnant, stated the following during an interview:

I don't feel pregnant. I am an involuntarily childless person who fights against having a miscarriage. I don't belong on the fortunate side. Maybe the day I give birth to a healthy child, but until then, I will still be a person who is fighting against childlessness. I think it will be that way all the way.

Given that identity is continuously "announced" through discourse and appearance, social media functions as instances for such announcements and realisation. Joining and engaging in TTC communication practices becomes an instance of announcing a newly formulated identity to others who are regarded as sharing a reality with oneself.

Role adjustment

Identifications and role adjustments can be seen in the patterns of the choices made on social media sites concerning IC. Haimson (2018) argues that people present different identities simultaneously during life transitions and use various sites and networks that remain separate to facilitate life transitions through what he calls "social transition machinery". Concerning IC, life transition is intimately linked to role adjustment, which relates to how one identifies others as alike or different from oneself. In the present study, role adjustment relates to whether or not other involuntarily childless individuals are viewed as similar to oneself and whether parents are viewed as foreign to oneself. According to Matthews and Matthews (1986), the timing of changed identifications can vary. For instance, a quick diagnosis asserting biological children as an impossibility forces some individuals to quickly adjust to new identifications. Participants often

express that they find tremendous comfort in having their TTC accounts, as it enables them to connect with those they can genuinely identify with:

I want to thank ALL of you who have shared sadness and joy, supported, and been there for me during this difficult time during IVF. I've met many new IVF friends through this account, who have lifted my spirits when I've had a difficult time. (Instagram post)

Role adjustment can also be seen through managing accounts and segmenting audiences. Offline networks are, for instance, often excluded from posts and communication relating to IC. Here, audience segmentation is done through several separate accounts, where one account is aimed at offline networks, and a different account is aimed at a TTC audience or network. The TTC account is further managed by segmenting audiences not to allow offline networks to follow the TTC account. The contents followed are often segmented by unfollowing accounts or hiding contents from accounts that distribute unwanted information, such as pregnancy announcements or pregnancy-related updates. Role adjustment can also impact women who decide to discuss IC on platforms where their face-to-face networks can identify them, for example:

Today, I've written about our journey on my regular social media. I haven't said a word about that [IC] so far, so now there lies the rub: childlessness, IVF, pregnancy, children. [...] With shaky fingers, I pressed SHARE just an hour ago, and the response I received is already overwhelming. I hope many dare to share today so that more people understand what it means to go through involuntary childlessness. I have also thought about if I should keep this account or not. Should it be renamed? Should it be public rather than private? Right now, I enjoy it here among all of you. (Instagram post)

It is evident from our interviews and Instagram posts that the participants often – at least in the most intense periods of IC – regard contacts connected to their TTC account as their primary network on Instagram, rather than those with whom they have face-to-face interaction. Unlike previous studies on stigmatised disclosures (Andalibi, 2019), our findings indicate that online communication between anonymous participants enables “strong ties” to develop and that these ties persist over time and are truly personal. For instance, participants express notions of sisterhood, signalling important bonds, and shared experiential realities.

TTC communication as a safe space in the digital realm

The silencing of IC (Blyth & Moore, 2001; Letherby, 1999, 2002; Miall, 1986) often prevents those unaffected from realising the magnitude of IC as a societal issue that causes crisis and reorientation in the lives of the affected. In the interviews, many of our participants explained that the online experience has dual implications. On the one hand, it offers anonymity and a chance to discuss issues that lack outlets elsewhere through TTC communication. Still, on the other hand, expectations set in the offline realm *do* follow into the online environment. For accounts where online interaction is maintained with offline contacts, feedback is often expected on content about pregnancies or children. In these instances, the participants felt that online interaction with offline contacts does

not allow them to be socially safe from pregnancy and child-related issues, even when physically distant:

I don't get the whole thing about sharing pictures of your kids ALL the time, from sonograms to bellies to the first meal to strollers. I throw up! I've unfollowed so many people. I simply can't digest those who lose it as soon as they have kids. (Instagram post)

Through their “regular accounts”, our participants follow accounts and react to specific posts because social protocol expects them to do so. TTC communication allows them to share their vulnerabilities and protect themselves from unwanted information and social pressures. They often report that they regard TTC communication as the “safe space”, which they lack in other contexts. The term “safe spaces” has primarily been associated with oppressed groups, such as women, sexual minorities, or individuals of colour. Clark-Parsons (2018: 2127) explains that safe spaces are instances where “marginalized users (can) speak freely, seek support, and organize action against injustices faced outside the group's boundaries”. In contrast to understanding “safe spaces” as vehicles to organise activism and as shelters from oppression and hate speech, we use the concept of safe space to denote an existential struggle, vulnerability, and life transition that causes women to seek out online, anonymous, and intimate spaces helping them attain a sense of existential belonging and security.

The online world offers both possibilities and establishes new vulnerabilities when creating a safe space in TTC communication. Many of the participants struggle with technology to segment their receiving audiences because the algorithmic decision-making on Instagram regularly connects their accounts in unexpected and unwanted ways, which may expose the participant's TTC communication to unintended face-to-face contacts or networks.

Another instance that disturbs or threatens to disturb the function of TTC communication as a safe space comes from within the community itself. Hashtag searches are often instrumental in helping women approach TTC communication on Instagram by offering a way to find posts, accounts, and different topical communities relating to IC. The participants engaged in TTC communication occasionally perceive that others misuse hashtags that they follow to engage and find support in IC issues (e.g., #ivfwarrior or #infertilitysucks). When these hashtags are used in connection to posts that announce or relate to pregnancy or children, they can expose participants to unwanted information and violate and disrupt the boundaries of the safe space and perceived shared reality that TTC communication stands for.

TTC communication practices are imbued with further unwritten rules of conduct developed and maintained to protect those participating from being exposed to all pregnancy and child-related issues, which the participants often feel are dominant in all other settings. Participants in TTC communication who do become pregnant and continue to participate can cause a rift to develop between participants:

Suddenly, this feels like a forum for those who are pregnant or have had a baby. [emoji covering eyes] Congratulations! [heart emoji] But If I got pregnant, I would open another account out of respect for those still struggling. (Instagram post)

Given that circumstances may change and some participants may become pregnant or have children, some participants may also become vulnerable to communication and updates from within what is regarded as a safe space. There is also abundant evidence of participants being careful not to upset or hurt other participants, stating “I know what it feels like” as they announce that they will no longer post updates – often adding that they will visit what will remain an essential context for them.

Conclusions

Our study of IC women who turn to TTC communication to face life-defining moments and grapple with a limit-situation leads us to identify TTC communication as a site of struggle with and through social media. First, we find that the struggle of transitioning towards nonmotherhood is configured in the online realm through the dimensions of reality reconstruction, identity transformation, and role adjustment. Second, we find that the participants strive to contribute to TTC communication and make the TTC context a safe space that offers shelter from existential pain and exposure to new vulnerabilities embedded in social media.

Through the lens of digital existence, we view IC women as digital existers as they do not only communicate about their situations but transition, reconstruct, and struggle with identity moving through the existential terrains of connectivity on Instagram (Lagerkvist, 2017). Their struggle is constituted and documented in and through that terrain as they create posts and feeds and trace and document a digital existential transition. In ways that the offline cannot offer, IC women find anonymous others on Instagram who are part of their transition towards a new identity and a new role. They go on to reconstruct a new reality through TTC communication. The quest for others who understand them and connect with their vulnerabilities and the affordances (i.e., segmenting audiences, anonymity, personalised feeds, and hashtags) facilitated by social media help these women digitally emerge as nonmothers, often before they ever share the issue with anyone in their face-to-face networks. TTC communication offers a social context for exposure and a terrain through which to touch upon and gradually approach the painful realisation of possible nonmotherhood. In the realm of TTC communication, and its ambivalent terrains of connectivity, IC women emerge as existers in search of existential security.

Notes

1. Here, TTC communication refers to social media (e.g., blogs, Facebook, and Instagram) accounts that are maintained by the involuntarily childless, many of which describe their efforts to extend their families. Although “TTC” implies pregnancy attempts, it is intended here to also include those involuntarily childless who use or plan to use alternative means, such as adoption. However, most of the accounts that we studied describe pregnancy attempts, either without medical assistance or through fertility treatments. The term “trying to conceive” is widely used in online contexts and by the affected themselves.
2. Matthews and Matthews (1986) here have a sociological perspective and furthermore assume IC as an issue exclusively for married (heterosexual) couples. That is not the reality of TTC communication participants, which includes an array of experiences and identifications. We, however, find the dimensions introduced by these authors as highly relevant in understanding the processual and multilayered state of IC.

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