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Contemporary Parenting: Do Croatian Parents Seek Parenting Advice Using the Internet?

Abstract: Contemporary parenting is influenced by rapidly developing technology, easy access to information, and the exchange of ideas through interpersonal digital communication, i.e., the ability to communicate with others via a digital network. Today's parents are actively involved in the trend of obtaining information from the Internet, thus there is a need to explore the topic from a pedagogical perspective to help develop parents' competencies. An online survey that included 390 respondents was conducted to investigate parents' opinions about whether the Internet is a useful source of advice on raising children, with comparisons made between the responses based on parents' age, level of education, and frequency of visits to social networks. In general, the respondents had slightly positive opinions on the usefulness and applicability of advice on raising children collected via the Internet; however, differences in opinion between respondents with different levels of education were found. In addition, a statistically significant difference was found in the respondents' confidence in the advice collected from social media based on the frequency with which they visited social media sites.

Keywords: contemporary parenting, parenting, the Internet, social media, seeking advice

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Introduction

Contemporary parents face unique challenges, many of which are due to the digitalization of society; however, there are other factors that affect the dynamics of parenthood and family, including extended working hours, unstable employment, unemployment, two-income families (Čudina-Obradović and Obradović 2000), an imbalance of parental roles in the family home, technological and scientific progress, and a changing image of childhood (Bašić 2011). Parents often struggle in their role as a parent; indeed, there is no parenting school or systematic teaching on how to raise a child. Furthermore, pluralization of family structures, articulated pedocentrism, and consumerism (Dadić 2015) have changed notions of parenthood, as can be recognized in parents' actions and responsibilities. The concept of parenthood (Kušević 2011; Pregrad 2010) includes responsibilities such as care-taking and educational tasks and procedures, and the notion is increasingly focusing on the way parents treat their children rather than procreation and the act of giving birth. Due to the growing emphasis on parenting practices and responsibilities, postmodern parents are constantly looking for ways to improve their parenting competencies, so parenting in the postmodern era is often defined by seeking advice on upbringing, which can lead to conflicting advice (Polivanova 2015). Indeed, books on »correct« parental behaviour are driving parents to a potentially dangerous state of parenting paranoia (Furedi 2002), and the increasing infiltration of digital technology into the family home is further contributing to this. Parents use the Internet and social media not only for entertainment, communication, and leisure, but also for educational purposes, and parents often connect with other parents and share parenting tips through digital tools and on social media (Madge and O'Connor 2006; Pedersen and Smithson 2010). Accordingly, education professionals and educators need to consider what role electronic media plays in family pedagogy, as well as how and for what purpose parents use these digital tools. Furthermore, it is crucial to explore the role of digital tools in parents' self-perception and whether they create a sense of success or failure (i.e., anxiety), as mentioned by Furedi (2002).

Characteristics of the Postmodern Family and Postmodern Parenting

The postmodern family, like any family, is a fundamental element of society and social communities and is in constant interaction with the environment. The family is a dynamic system that changes along with society, so it can be a glimpse of the contradictions a society is experiencing (Maleš and Kušević 2011). Precisely because of the pluralization of the family structure, the concept of »parenthood« is difficult to define semantically. However, when defining parenting, emphasis should be placed on active parenting roles, including parental care and methods (Kušević 2011; Pregrad 2010). The paradigm shift to parenting as a set of skills and activities includes parental responsibility for correct actions, knowledge of children's developmental needs, and awareness of the foundations of pedagogy and psychology to develop children's full potential. Continuous learning is expected of parents, including monitoring, reflecting on, and changing ineffective parenting styles, as well as being open to learning (Ljubetić 2011). Precisely because there is no school for parents, as well as due to the pluralism of educational styles, an increase of both books and audio-visual content on electronic media about proper parenting and how to be a »good parent« is evident (Assarsson and Aarsand 2011). Therefore, there is a clear need to develop guidance and support for parents to help them critically analyse the advice they encounter (Connell-Carrick 2006). Information on proper parenting practices is only seconds away for today's parents, and the affirmation of the Internet as a key place for seeking information in Croatia (Ipsos 2019) suggests a high presence of parents in Croatia who are seeking and exchanging parental advice on social media.

Previous Research on the Use of the Internet in Parenting Counselling/Educational Purposes

Today's parents, under the influence of the rapid development of technology and subsequent easy availability of information, are actively involved in seeking information via the Internet. Their perceptions of correct parenting is influenced by electronic media such as educational television programs (Simpson 1997), when the importance of cooperation with media houses was emphasized 20 years ago, and the potential of this mass media was recognized (Milanović et al. 2000). The exchange of advice on the Internet is perceived by parents as a support system (Sarkadi and Bremberg 2004); this is especially true for mothers, for whom it reduces the stress of motherhood and facilitates the transition thereto (Magde and O'Connor 2006). In particular, single mothers with low education and monthly income levels have expressed a need for online support (Sarkadi and Bremberg 2005). Pedersen and Smithson (2010) confirmed that online communication with other parents can be an important support system, and as many as 40% of parents equate it with live communication. Furthermore, Duggan and colleagues (2015) showed that 75% of the mothers in their study turned to social media for both support and information related to parenting. Meanwhile, Breitenstein and colleagues (2020) compared the

differences between live interaction at children's clinics and parenting support through social media; analysis of the results indicated that knowledge of parenting acquired through an online platform reduced the use of corporal punishment by parents who were more prone to parental stress and behavioural problems, and parents with an online support system showed higher degrees of parental warmth, as well as better boundary setting and more proactive parenting. Furthermore, Rhodes and colleagues (2020) found that expecting and brand-new parents considered online applications to help relieve stress and feelings of isolation from other parents during the covid-19 pandemic. Also, they considered online applications a good source of digital content to assist in the new role of parenting; however, they suggested updating digital content to address specific parenting challenges during the covid-19 pandemic.

The use of the Internet as a support system for parents raises the issue of the »digital divide« (digital/technological stratification): socioeconomic factors, especially education and monthly income, are significant factors related to parents' Internet habits (Dworkin et al. 2013). According to a study by Rothbaum and colleagues (2008), parents of a higher socioeconomic status were more likely to find parenting tips online, while parents of lower socioeconomic status were more satisfied with the information they found online. Similarly, Radey and Randolph (2009) showed that highly educated parents sought information about parenting online more often than those with lower levels of education, while Doty and colleagues (2012) revealed differences in parents' information-seeking habits to be related to monthly income but not to age, gender, or education levels. Meanwhile, Sarkadi and Bremberg (2004) showed that parents with less education and of lower socioeconomic status were more likely to seek online support.

Objectives

Given the fact that modern parents often use the Internet for advice about raising children, the current study aimed to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in parents' opinions on the Internet as a useful source of advice based on the parents' age, level of education, and the frequency with which they accessed social media sites and parenting portals. The study seeks to answer three questions:

- How often do parents use the Internet to get parenting advice?
- Do parents believe that advice from social media strengthens their parenting competencies?
- How often do parents exchange information and advice on raising children via social media?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses related to the objectives were developed:

- There are differences in opinions of the Internet as a source of advice on raising children between parents with lower and higher levels of education.
- Parents with higher levels of education will have more positive opinions on the Internet as a source of advice on raising children than parents with lower levels of education.
- There will be differences in parents' confidence in the effectiveness of the parenting advice obtained from social media related to parents' age, level of education, and the frequency with which they visit social media sites. Younger parents, those with lower levels of education, and those who spend more time on social media are expected to have more positive opinions on the advice on raising children from social media than older parents, those with higher levels of education, and those who spend less time on social media.

The connection between parents' opinions on whether their parental competencies are strengthened through social media and parenting portals and level of education was also examined.

Methodology

Research Method

The research was conducted through an online questionnaire that was accessed via a link in an online form. The questionnaire was administered anonymously over three weeks, and participation was voluntarily. Research participants could terminate their participation in the research at any time. Completing the questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes.

Sample

The participants were parents aged 20 and over in the Republic of Croatia who agreed to participate in the research anonymously. A total of 390 respondents, all female, participated in the study. Respondents were divided into four age groups, and there were four categories of education levels as well. With regard to the frequency with which they visited social media sites, respondents were divided into five groups. These categories can be seen in Table 1.

Age	Sample	
	<i>f</i>	<i>%f</i>
20–30 years	105	26.9
31–40 years	233	59.7
41–50 years	47	12.1
> 51 years	5	1.3
N	390	100
Level of education		
	<i>f</i>	<i>%f</i>
primary education degree	5	1.2
secondary education degree	168	43.1
master's degree	185	47.4
doctoral degree	32	8.2
N	390	100
Frequency of social media use		
	<i>f</i>	<i>%f</i>
every day	56	14.4
once a week	167	42.8
once a month	100	25.5
once every six months	45	11.5
once a year	22	5.6
N	390	100

Table 1: Sample structure of parents' age, level of education, and frequency of social media use

Instrument

For the needs of the research, an online questionnaire was created, which the participants filled out voluntarily. The questionnaire was created by the authors of this paper to collect relevant data on the use of the Internet as a source of advice for parents. The first part of the questionnaire contained socio-demographic data: age, level of education, and frequency social network visits. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of items of two dependent variables divided into two scales: *Parental opinions on the Internet as a source of advice on raising children* and *Confidence in the effectiveness of parenting advice collected via social media*. The questionnaire contained open-ended and closed-ended questions. Research participants responded to statements on a Likert-type scale ranging from -2 = *I strongly disagree* to +2 = *I completely agree*. A pilot study was conducted using 30 subjects. The reliability of the scale *Parental opinions on the Internet as a source of advice on raising children* expressed by Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = 0.80$; the scale *Confidence in the effectiveness of parenting advice collected on social networks* expressed by Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = 0.88$. The normality of the scales' distri-

bution was examined by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, where it was found that the distribution of the results deviated significantly from the normal distribution ($p < 0.05$). Since the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is usually applied to large samples ($N > 1000$) and is extremely rigid, other parameters of distribution normality, namely distribution symmetry (skewness) and distribution kurtosis (kurtosis), were checked for determining the normality of data distribution. Since the results for symmetry and flatness of the distribution of results in both scales ranged between -2 and + 2 ($S1 = -0.36$, $K1 = -0.34$; $S2 = -0.04$; $K2 = -0.47$), the methods of parametric statistics were applied.

Data Analysis

The study results were processed and presented using standard scientific statistical methods supported by the IBM SPSS Statistics 24 program package. Descriptive statistics, i.e., the arithmetic means and standard deviations of the subjects' responses on scales, were calculated. To examine the differences in opinions on the Internet as a source of advice on raising children between parents with lower and higher education levels, as well as differences in confidence levels in the effectiveness of parenting advice collected from social media based on parents' age, level of education, and frequency of social network visits, bivariate analysis procedures were performed: the significance of differences using analysis of variance (ANOVA) with post hoc test Tukey (HSD) were calculated.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the second part of the questionnaire, which examined parents' opinions on the usefulness and applicability of advice on raising children collected via the Internet, found that respondents had slightly positive opinions, as the result was above the mean ($M = 11.2$; $ST = 4.146$; $\min = 5$; $\max = 25$; $Me = 10.00$). The total result of all respondents ranged between 5 and 25, and the most common result in all five variables was 9 ($Mo = 9$). A score lower than 11.2 indicates less favourable (i.e., negative) opinions of the usefulness of advice on raising children collected online, while a higher score indicates a positive opinion. Given that the average score in this variable was above 10, it can be concluded that the opinions of the respondents on the usefulness of advice on raising children collected via the Internet were generally positive. The results of the analysis of the part of the questionnaire that asked whether advice from social media strengthened parental competence found that respondents had slightly positive opinions, as the result was above the mean value ($M = 7.21$; $ST = 2.473$; $\min = 3$; $\max = 15$; $Me = 7.00$). The most common result in all five variables was 9 ($D = 9$). It can therefore be concluded that the respondents generally believed that advice from social media strengthened parenting competencies; a similar result was obtained by Sarkadi and Bremberg (2004), who concluded from a sample of 2221 respondents that par-

ents evaluated the exchange of advice online by the parenting support system. A descriptive analysis of the results found that almost half of the respondents never shared information or personal experiences about raising children through social media ($N = 198$; 50, 7%), followed by those who did very rarely ($N = 69$; 17.6%), occasionally ($N = 65$; 16.6%), frequently ($N = 40$; 10.2%), and every day ($N = 18$; 4.6%). In addition, it was found that most respondents never shared experiences with other parents about raising children through social media ($N = 166$; 42.6%), followed by those who did so occasionally ($N = 69$; 17.5%), frequently ($N = 68$; 17.3%), very rarely ($N = 52$; 13.2%), and every day ($N = 33$, 8.4%).

Variable: Level of education		N	Min	Max	M	SD
Parental opinions on the Internet as a source of advice on raising children	elementary education	5	8	24	18.80	6.301
	secondary education	168	8	37	20.17	6.896
	higher education	185	8	39	22.41	5.861
	PhD	32	9	39	21.22	7.129
df = 3/383						
F = 3.83						
p(F) = 0.01						

Table 2: Descriptive parameters and ANOVA for the variable »Parental opinions on the Internet as a source of advice on raising children« related to education level

As shown in Table 2, there is a statistically significant difference in parental opinions on the Internet as a source of advice on raising children related to parents' level of education ($F = 3.83$; $p(F) = 0.01$). A Tukey HSD post hoc test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between participants whose education levels were secondary and higher and higher education (Table 3).

Variable: Parental opinions on the Internet as a source of advice on raising children	elementary education M = 18.80	secondary education M = 20.17	higher education M = 22.41	PhD M = 21.22
elementary education		0.99	0.60	0.86
secondary education			0.06	0.83
higher education				0.77
PhD				

Table 3: Tukey HSD post hoc test for the variable »Parental opinions on the Internet as a source of advice on raising children«

Since the average score in this variable was the highest among respondents with higher education levels ($M = 22.41$; $ST = 5.881$), it could be concluded that higher education plays a role in creating opinions about online information sources. This data could be explained by the fact that with an increase in education level, the occupational structure itself changes, especially in terms of the use of digital

tools, so it can be assumed that people with higher education levels use social media and parenting portals more often than people with lower education levels. Indeed, the results of Dworkin et al. (2013) research emphasize that socioeconomic factors (monthly income and education in particular) are important with regard to parents' Internet habits. Similar results were obtained by Radey and Randolph (2009), who found that highly educated parents were more likely to seek information about parenting online than those with lower education levels. Doty and colleagues (2012), however, found that there was a difference in habits related to monthly income, but none related to age, gender, or parental education level. Descriptive parameters found that 203 respondents ($N = 203$; 52.05%) exchanged information and advice on raising children through social media once a week, which is a considerable number. This is followed by respondents who exchanged information every day ($N = 100$; 25.64%); once a month ($N = 53$; 13.59%); and every six months ($N = 34$; 8.72%).

The current study is based on the assumption that younger parents, those with lower levels of education, and those who visited social media sites more frequently would have more confidence in the parenting advice collected via social media than older parents, those with higher education levels, and those who visited social media sites less frequently. Data analysis (ANOVA) revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between parents' confidence in advice collected on social media and age ($F = 0.93$; $p(F) = 0.43$) or level of education ($F = 1.15$; $p(F) = 0.32$). However, a statistically significant difference was confirmed between confidence in parenting advice obtained from social media and frequency of social media use ($F = 11.33$; $p(F) = 0.00$). To be specific, the Tukey HSD post hoc test found a statistically significant difference between respondents who visited social media sites once a week and once a year, once a week and once a month, once a week and once a year, once every six months and once a year, and every day and once a year (Table 4). Since the average score in this variable was highest among respondents who visited social media sites every day ($M = 77.9$; $ST = 2.640$), it can be said that increased use of social media leads to higher confidence in parenting advice obtained therefrom.

Variable: Confidence in parenting advice obtained from social media	every day $M = 7.79$	once a week $M = 7.73$	once a month $M = 6.79$	once every six months $M = 6.80$	once a year $M = 4.50$
every day		1.00	0.85	0.22	0.00
once a week			0.14	0.13	0.00
once a month				1.00	0.00
once every six months					0.02
once a year	0.00	0.00	0.00		

Table 4: Tukey HSD post hoc test for the variable »Confidence in parenting advice obtained from social media«

This result can be interpreted as showing that an increase in Internet and social media use leads to increased confidence in the advice gathered therefrom.

The correlation between parents' opinions on whether their parental competencies were strengthened through social media and parents' level of education was checked by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient and did not prove statistically significant ($RP(390) = 0.055$; $p(r) = 0.28$). Therefore, it cannot be said that a higher level of education increased parents' opinions on whether their parental competencies were strengthened through social media. However, since the average score in this variable in all five categories was higher than the central value ($Me = 12.5$), it can be said that the respondents generally believed that the use of social media strengthened their parenting competencies.

Conclusion

The results of this study found that the participants had slightly positive opinions about the usefulness of parenting advice collected online. This result is not surprising given the fact that we live in a digital age and in a time of increasing use of the Internet and other digital tools for various purposes, including interpersonal communication, education, professional development, and more; we are witnessing the necessary use of the Internet for not only professional purposes but also every day, practical ones. Therefore, questions about the reliability and validity of the content available on the Internet are raised; this is an especially sensitive matter when it comes to issues related to raising children. Precisely for this reason, one of the goals of this research was to determine how often parents use the Internet to get advice on parenting, and whether parents believe that advice from social media strengthens their parenting competencies. Although the majority of the respondents in this study visited social media sites once a month or once a week, the data indicates that a significant proportion of parents rely on online sources when it comes to their children's educations. In addition, over half of the respondents exchanged information and advice on raising children through social media once a week, which is relatively common. This leads to questions of how reliable the information obtained from the Internet and social media is, meaning to what extent the sources of information have been scientifically established and whether, as a result, unreliable information obtained on the Internet may be harmful. However, to know the answers to these questions, new research with qualitative elements should be conducted.

This study further hypothesized that parents with higher levels of education, due to presumed higher digital competencies involving critical thinking, would have more positive opinions about using the Internet as a source of advice than parents with lower levels of education. A statistically significant difference between mothers with secondary and higher education in this variable partially confirms this assumption. The results support the fact that increasing one's level of education generally includes more digital competencies, so digital resources are more accessible to mothers with higher levels of education. This implies a need for lifelong non-formal and informal education and digital competences. Moreover, the expected differences in parents' confidence in the advice obtained from social media related

to age, level of education, and frequency of social media use were found only with regard to frequency of social media use. To be specific, a statistically significant difference was found between respondents who visited social media sites once a week and once a year, once a week and once a month, once every six months and once a year, and every day. Given that the average values in this variable were the highest among respondents who visited social media sites daily, it can be concluded that an increased use of social media leads to increased confidence in the effectiveness of parental advice collected therefrom.

The current study involved 390 people, all of whom were mothers. This is also one of the limitations of the research, as it would be interesting to see if there are differences of opinion on the usefulness of parenting advice collected online between mothers and fathers. In addition, in future research, a questionnaire with items on social media and parenting portal types should be created, and a larger sample should be used.

The results of this study imply a need for continuing individuals' lifelong educations to help people develop critical thinking about the content available on the Internet. While the results of the research show positive opinions on the usefulness of advice on raising children collected from the Internet, it would be interesting to explore what tools parents use on the Internet, which would require detailed qualitative analysis and a different research approach.

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SODOBNO STARŠEVSTVO: ALI HRVAŠKI STARŠI NASVETE O STARŠEVSTVU IŠČEJO NA SPLETU?

Povzetek: Na sodobno starševstvo vplivajo hitro razvijajoča se tehnologija, lahek dostop do informacij in izmenjava idej prek spleta, tj. možnost komuniciranja z drugimi prek digitalnih omrežij. Današnji starši aktivno iščejo informacije na spletu, zato je treba to temo raziskati tudi s pedagoškega vidika, če želimo uporabnikom pomagati razvijati starševske zmožnosti. V spletni raziskavi, v kateri je sodelovalo 390 anketirancev, smo proučevali stališča staršev o tem, ali je svetovni splet koristen vir nasvetov o vzgoji otrok, pri čemer smo njihove odgovore primerjali glede na starost, stopnjo izobrazbe in pogostost uporabe družbenih omrežij. Na splošno so imeli anketiranci precej pozitivno mnenje o koristnosti in uporabnosti nasvetov o vzgoji, ki jih pridobijo na spletu, vendar smo ugotovili razlike v stališčih med anketiranci z različnimi stopnjami izobrazbe. Poleg tega smo ugotovili tudi statistično pomembne razlike v zaupanju anketirancev v nasvete, ki jih pridobijo na družbenih omrežjih, glede na pogostost uporabe družbenih medijev.

Ključne besede: sodobno starševstvo, starševstvo, splet, družbeni mediji, iskanje nasvetov

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