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AN ANALYSIS OF VIRTUAL SOCIAL SUPPORT COMMUNITY OF
MOTHERS IN THE CONTEXT OF IDENTITY, AGENCY AND
COLLECTIVITY

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An Analysis of Virtual Social Support Community of Mothers in the Context of
Identity, Agency and Collectivity

Kimlik, Eylemlilik ve Kolektivizm Bağlamında Annelerin Sanal Sosyal Destek
Topluluğu Analizi

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- 5) Kırılganlık
- 6) Feminist Araştırma

- 1) Motherhood
- 2) New Media
- 3) Virtual Social Support Community
- 4) Grounded Theory
- 5) Vulnerability
- 6) Feminist Research

PREFACE

TO MY DAUGHTER...

Sometimes, it's hard to imagine how deep an impression you can leave on your child's mind as a mother. You open a window to the world that shapes her philosophy of life with what you grieve, what you laugh about, the way you deal with the challenges you face, and all the responses you give or fail to give. In this sense, although this dissertation is initiated with a journey towards my goal of a doctorate, completing this long and difficult journey means more to me than a personal achievement. It has been arduous, but I never regret haven taken it, in which I felt that I improved all along the line. It would not be possible to find my way without the support and good counsel of many people. I would like to express my sincere thankfulness to all people who accompanied me, starting with my daughter Ekin Akman for giving me the opportunity to be the most cherished person in someone's life. It is a profound honor to be your mom. Additionally, as a woman, I am so lucky to have a father and a mother who always stand behind me in my choices, decisions and difficult moments under all circumstances. Without my parent`s confidence in my ability, encouragement, and love for me, I would not have been the person I am today and able to complete this journey.

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Thanks to the many people who contributed to this dissertation, today, I would like to invite you to walk with me through a group of women's words and experiences that honor the knowledge they share in their individual points of view.

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ABBREVIATIONS

GTM	Grounded Theory Methodology
ICT	Information Communication Technologies
AA	Arařtıran Anneler

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of virtual communities, along with computer-mediated communication, can hardly be considered a contemporary notion. However, virtual communities created for and by women with diverse contexts in new media platforms became a new site within which women from diverse positions seek social support and advice from similar others to overcome various social issues and cope with life experiences away from the impositions of the public. This dissertation aims to present a multifaceted understanding of one poorly documented context of virtual social support experience, “mediated motherhood”, through a specific case, in Turkey. The current literature on mothers’ use of virtual communities is highly dominated by behavioral approaches explaining the motivational factors in accessing those spaces. However, there is a consistent lack of consideration of political, social, ideological meanings and the cultural context of motherhood. The impact of women’s online experience on the real-life context is mostly absent from the discussion. Based on this, how women’s engagement of online interaction, various aspects of use and practices of those spaces transform the experience of motherhood becomes the primary concern of this dissertation. This study, moves beyond the behavioral approach, presents an analysis from the perspective of feminist theory of motherhood and calls into question the transforming potential of those spaces in providing support for social change. Accordingly, multi-dimensional perspective to the analysis enables to examine the social worlds of mothers respectively in their connection with each other, and it addresses the need to think beyond the emergent spaces to larger social reality. This study combining digital ethnography with sequential in-depth interviews within a constructivist grounded theory methodology looks for ways to generate a new theoretical framework to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experience of motherhood at the crossroads of virtual and real. The interactional experience of motherhood is covered in an evolving process of empowerment, and the consequences that constitute empowerment and the redefined concept of vulnerability as a condition that makes the process possible, as a whole, represents the substantive grounded theory developed throughout the dissertation. Through a

strategic case selection, the study captures nuances of the virtual community of support experience within a specific cultural context of motherhood, in which the new conceptual resources could apply to future studies in the intercultural and comparative field within and beyond the context of maternal subjects.

Keywords: Motherhood, virtual social support community, new media, grounded theory, vulnerability, feminist research

ÖZET

Bilgisayar aracılı iletişimle birlikte sanal toplulukların ortaya çıkışı pek yeni bir kavram olarak kabul edilemez. Fakat, yeni medya platformlarında, farklı bağlamlarda kadınlar tarafından yine kadın için oluşturulan sanal topluluklar, farklı konumlardaki kadınların çeşitli sosyal sorunları aşmak ve yaşam deneyimleriyle başa çıkmak için sosyal destek ve tavsiye aradığı, toplumsal dayatmalardan uzak yeni bir alan haline gelmiştir. Bu tez, Türkiye'de belli bir sanal topluluk üzerinden sosyal destek deneyiminin yetersiz belgelenmiş bir bağlamı olan dijital anneliğe ilişkin çok yönlü bir anlayış sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Annelerin sanal toplulukları kullanımına dair mevcut literatüre, bu alanlara erişmedeki motivasyonel faktörleri açıklayan davranışsal yaklaşım büyük ölçüde hakimdir. Ancak anneliğin siyasi, sosyal, ideolojik anlam ve pratikleri ve içinde bulunduğu kültürel bağlamı dikkate alma konusunda tutarlı bir eksiklik mevcuttur. Kadınların çevrimiçi deneyimlerinin gerçek yaşam bağlamı üzerindeki etkisi ise tartışmada çoğunlukla yer almamaktadır. Bu bağlamda bu tez, kadınların çevrimiçi etkileşime katılımının, bu alanların çeşitli kullanımı ve pratiklerinin annelik deneyimini ne yönde ve nasıl dönüştürdüğünü anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Davranışçı yaklaşımın ötesine geçmeyi amaçlayan bu tez, feminist annelik kuramı perspektifinden bir analiz sunmakta ve toplumsal değişime destek sağlama yeteneğinin sağlanmasında bu alanların dönüştürücü potansiyelini sorgulamaktadır. Çok boyutlu analiz bakış açısı kullanılarak, annelerin sanal ve gerçek sosyal dünyaları sırası ve birbirleriyle olan bağlantılarıyla incelenmiş ve bu şekilde, araştırmaya konu olan sanal alanın ötesinde daha geniş bir sosyal gerçekliğe yönelik düşünme ihtiyacı da karşılanmıştır. Dijital etnografi ve yarı yapılandırılmış çoklu derinlemesine görüşmeler ile birlikte elde edilen veriler yapılandırmacı gömülü teori çerçevesinde analiz edilmiş ve analiz sonucunda çevrim içi ve çevrimdışı kesişimindeki annelik deneyimine dair yeni bir teorik çerçeve geliştirmiştir. Oluşturulan teorik çerçeve kapsamında anneliğin etkileşimsel deneyimi, döngüsel ve gelişen bir güçlendirme (empowerment) süreci ve onu oluşturan bileşenler dahilinde ele alınmıştır. Bununla birlikte, kırılabilirlik olgusu bu süreci mümkün kılan sosyal etkileşimin bir koşulu

olarak bulgulanmış ve yeniden kavramsallaştırılarak tezin geliřtirmiş olduđu teorik çerçeveye dahil edilmiştir. Stratejik bir vaka seçimi yoluyla, çalışma belirli bir kültürel annelik bağlamında sanal destek deneyiminin nüanslarını yakalamayı amaçlarken, annelik bağlamında ve ötesinde, kültürlerarası ve karşılaştırmalı alanda gelecekteki çalışmalara uygulanabilecek yeni teorik ve kavramsal kaynaklar sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Annelik, sanal sosyal destek topluluđu, yeni medya, gömülü teori, kırılgnlık, feminist araştırma

INTRODUCTION

“The words are being spoken now, are being written down, the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through”

(Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born, 1995)

1. LOOKING AT MOTHERHOOD THROUGH THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT

The topic of this thesis has developed out of my personal experiences, scholarly interest in mothering practices and my immersion in the digital culture of motherhood. This dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the interactional experience of the virtual and real-world of motherhood through a particular case, a social network of women in the online environment *Araştırın Anneler* (Researching Mothers) with a specific focus on the cultural context of Turkey. Although the selected case is the empirical local of this study, adopting the notion of connective ethnography (Hine, 2007) and inspired by the contextualist perspective of previous feminist media studies (Douglas & Michaels, 2005 ; Ang, 2018) which refuses the divide of being online and the setting of everyday life, this study embraces connectivity of both social grounds for a fine-grained analysis of online support community of mothers and its interactions in women’s everyday lives of mothering.

My first-hand observation has led me to note that a woman’s transition into becoming a mother can be much more complex and stressful than expected. As one of the critical life experiences for women, it signifies a period of significant disruption and identity transition. As a woman, you struggle with a delicate balancing act to integrate your new self into former ones (employee, wife, friend, family member). On the other hand, more than a biological reality, motherhood is a socio-cultural construct that sets up a substructure woman inhabit and gives her

the conditions of possibility; and shapes the way she experiences her life and social identity. Although many of us begin our journey with the idea that motherhood will happen as it should in its natural flow, the transition a woman needs to make is often not limited by the new motherhood. It is a life-long restructuring process that begins at pregnancy which requires several transitions, assume different responsibilities and constant learning with the new life events and milestones attained. Alike, at the time of my new motherhood, I was thirty-one, and four years later, I have embarked on motherhood in a particular context as a single mother of four years old girl. The period actually marked a new transition that requires me to reconstruct myself as a woman and a mother by re-imagining what it really means to be a family for a mother-daughter duo that hardly represents itself as a family in the face of the normative notions of marriage paradigm. The irony is that; your courage in departing from an abusive marriage meets with various punishments in myriad ways at social and legal scales that penetrates every part of an individual's life, especially if you are a woman who chooses to be a mother. Despite the gender norms supposed to be evolved, being woman as mother at divorce made me realize more deeply than ever the durability of patriarchal ideologies of parenting and how my experience as a mother and, my life as a woman is constrained by the barriers of politics of the power imbalances and gender inequalities. All of which is from the very beginning underpins my conception of this research as a feminist intervention grounded in the value of mother's voices.

I was trying to make sense of what I really experience is both for myself and my girl, and needed to see my new journey as a mother through the eyes of others who have already walked through a similar experience to mine, which is unfortunately not a kind of knowledge that can be attained from parenting books. The fact is that, whereas previous generations of mothers relied on local knowledge and traditions, I am coming from a generation overwhelmed by scientific understanding of child-rearing, relied on parenting books, is obliged to forge ties to authoritative institutions and visit pediatricians regularly to monitor child's development to be a good mother. However, along with the digitalization, mothers have retooled their

women's work, have changed information-seeking practices and increasingly turned to parenting websites, blogs, informal networks of mothers. (Bernhardt & Felter, 2004; McDaniel et al, 2012; Gibson & Hanson, 2013). In a fashion similar to that, I became aware of and participated in an online social support community, *Araştıran Anneler* intending to gain from the actual experiences and knowledge of women having similar circumstances to my own. Information and knowledge taking place at the site are shared by mothers not experts, and interactive nature of discussion allows a great amount of production and exchange of information that becomes a valuable source for other mothers. Basically, in this virtual venue, women use their own stories of motherhood to support each other and themselves, which can be considered as an alternative to mainstream authoritative knowledge. Informational support and advice are evident in the sharing stories of the women about motherhood with the issues related to child-rearing and infant care, and a range of topics, including the ones related with their maternal bodies and social relations of parenting.

While I was pursuing my own issues of becoming a single mother in the group's posts, on the other hand, I also began to pay sustained attention to the stories of other mothers. What I have realized was the complex and contradictory nature of our everyday survival of women as mothers. In our localized social world, preoccupations of motherhood, positioned experiences of being a mother, our perspectives on our identities and concerns become apparent in our mothering accounts. Reading and listening to the other's stories allowed me to capture the consistent themes in the various experiences of motherhood. However, when I recognized the disappearance of some issues in the group discussion, the first thing that started to poke my mind was the mechanisms defining the boundaries of the community experience of women in the online environment. Relationally, the type of connections we formed online, our commitments to this space and the ways of communication intersected with the digital setting raised the first question in my mind: what is allowed to occur in this women-only social space? This is basically how I began to pursue this research topic, where the main objective is to explore

the nature of the virtual community experiences of women in relation to the subjectivities constructed, and social realities of motherhood reproduced at the intersections of communication technologies and the real-life experience of motherhood as a socio-cultural construct. From this point forth, while this dissertation mainly questions the nature of women's experience of interactional space of online and offline, it also looks for the ways to interpret the potential of this virtual space in transforming the women's everyday experiences of motherhood by raising further questions including but not limited to the following:

- How do women employ and integrate information within the context of everyday mothering and express sharing and learning experiences into their maternal identities?
- How do everyday practices of virtual community function to affect women's real-sense of empowerment?
- How do the derived meanings of the online interaction affect mothering practices, social relations of parenting, and women's perception of themselves as mothers?

As a matter of fact, online group communication can be traced back to the 1970s, and in that sense, virtual community can hardly be considered as a recent notion. Whole Earth Lectronic Link (WELL), created by intellectuals from different backgrounds in 1985 and covering wide range of topics, is the primordial template of today's virtual communities of today. As the virtual communities became widespread, they garnered a lot of academic attention of scholars and has been studied by a variety of disciplines. Despite the wide variety of perspectives on the discussion of the term, virtual community research has been remained highly dominated by the connotations of market functioning. Especially at some stage at the dot.com boom, online communities became an important part of marketing practices, degraded to a definition of group of consumers enthusiastic about a specific product or brand. On the other hand, interests had not remained confined by the marketing application, but also, they were also considered as crucial information-oriented environments for businesses and state institutions (Burnett,

2011). More recently, the advent of Web 2.0 and the emergence of social networking, by integrating various communal practices into different forms of virtual communities, offer an impetus for the development of new conceptual categories for the investigation of online experience. Enabled by the ICT and computer-mediated communication, social interaction in communities, regarding various commonality of experience and social issues, were realized in the virtual space without the condition of locality. In accordance, our understanding and sense of community went through a change as the arousal of new media platforms has added up a new dimension in the discussion of public sphere and the differentiation of public discourse (Kellner, 1998; Herring, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002; Zoonen, 2001; Kendall, 2002; Donath, & Boyd, 2004; Johanessen 2013). In respect to this, digital media & technologies are contested medium, and their intersection with gender is the subject of a considerable debate when its subversive potential in repressive gender regimes is concerned. In the recent years, earlier critics who claimed the medium was dominantly masculine, have given way for the claims such as “social media is a women’s medium”, democratizing the women rights movement. (Spender, 1995; Patel, 2017) In similar vein, dystopian evaluations of virtual space couched within the various claims of cyber-feminism that highlights the significance of disembodiment (Haraway, 1987).

Even though the limited construction of women as consumers in virtual space has so long overshadowed their various practices and uses of digital media (Zoonen, 2001), currently increasing number of women continue to create own spaces of dialogue in the online world to manage their experiences of social concerns. Over the last few decades, while the feminist movements have reached out to digitally connected millions, in the scope; we have witnessed that women-only online user groups strengthen the solidarities across diverse categories of identity with the commitment to overcome range of social issues from oppression, social exclusion, isolation, and exploitation to violence. Those spaces not only become an important tool for the agency and self-determination of third world women who are seeking to maintain a sense of cultural belongings and political connection beyond the

national boundaries (Gajjala 2002, 2003; Jad & Nourai-Simone, 2005; Bailey, 2012; Lee 2013) but, has become an important resource for women seeking for social support and experiential knowledge. Women from diverse backgrounds, excluded from mainstream society, carve out new spaces for expression and articulation of identity away from the restricted world of mass media and impositions of the public. Today, the increasing number of virtual communities created by women for women at the intersection of multiple identities with gender, have a potential to demonstrate the importance of inclusiveness. Besides the diasporic communities of women, and comparing to overtly political tones of organized global feminist networks toward gender equality and civic engagements in social movements against various types of repression, many individual women experience online gender network affiliations in different contexts out of conscious political engagement. Online social support communities created in different contexts by women for similar others illustrate one of the important examples that enables women`s agency in the production of knowledge.

What is common in those instances is that digital technologies and media provide access for women from diverse situations to engage in debate in new spaces surpassing mainstream exclusions and beyond the public areas of state bodies. In that sense, women`s engagement with various virtual communities can be beneficial in examining media`s contribution to their possibilities for agency and social processes and connections it enables when they have access to it. Today, an online search generates a long list of virtual social support groups offered by new media platforms, within diverse community contexts addressing the various needs, interests and concerns of women. Among them, motherhood represents a prominent category. *Araştırın Anneler*, of which I have been a member since 2017 and selected as the critical case for this study, is one of the largest virtual community with 15,722 members, dedicated to support mothers within the plethora of online user groups on the platform of Facebook. While information sharing and support are the essential components of the online experience, there is a considerable amount of knowledge creation that occur during the online interactions in those

spaces, which I suggest, opens a generative room for illuminating silences and gaps of everyday life of mothering. However relatively little is known about how the politics of mothering impacts the online experience in terms of information sharing, creation and meaning-making. Furthermore, economic, social and political dimensions of motherhood experience are a significant oversight in the discussion of mediated motherhood.

My observations are echoed in the feminist studies. Simply put, women who enter into motherhood must negotiate not only the realities such as pregnancy, physical health, child-birth procedures but face the challenges of childcare within cultural, social, economic and political contexts including mental health, domestic labor and marital relationship, work conflict and sexual orientation (Ross, 2016). While the anxiety and exhaustion accompanying mental tiredness are highly associated with the uncertainty women feel about childcare (Larsson, 2009), the reasons for such tiredness, which might be as much the results of socio-cultural construction and politics of mothering, are mostly absent from the discussion. Correlatively, while the inadequacy of the traditional support circles is a plausible explanation for the social isolation and loneliness of contemporary motherhood (Collins, 2000), motivational factors for access to and participation in virtual communities made clear by the previous studies are limited to the need for informational and social support, sense of connection and overcoming isolation (Johnson, 2015).

Moreover, how do women reflect their online experience on their daily survival of motherhood within their socio-cultural context remains unexamined. Specifically, in Turkey, there is a limited number of studies about the mothers' use of social media, and they mainly focus on blogger mothers (Parmaksız & Melis, 2012; Gürçayır, 2014). There is a need for empirically derived discussion informing the literature on the significance of examining the experience and complexity of articulations of gender and virtual community of support. In that sense, this study addresses the need for social navigation of those virtual spaces to be able to move

beyond the view focusing on the information function and behavioral elements of the gender network experience.

Accordingly, the dissertation explores the possibilities of online interaction that inform women's real-life experiences of motherhood in relation to the traditional constructions of femininity. Therefore, the fundamental problem established in this study is to make the connections between the individual and the social. In this sense, this study adopts the feminist framework of mothering/motherhood as a theoretical perspective that provides critical thinking on women's as mothers. The feminist framework provides valuable insights into the social construction of femininity and how it is practiced (Stoppard, 2000) and performed (Butler 1990) within motherhood. Similar to the concept of marriage, motherhood is a central resource to construct feminine identities and a practice needs to be rewarded socially and materially (Stoppard, 2000). As a central aspect of femininity, motherhood is inseparably linked to and is ingrained in the concept of womanhood. This relational obligatory is defined by Russo (1976, p.4) as "a woman's *raison d'être*" (the reason that women exist) and that the condition of a woman without children is considered as a deficiency. Rather than defining motherhood as a reproduction or natural biological function, the feminist maternal standpoint conceives motherhood as an "institution" as well as an "individual experience" (Rich, 1995). In this respect, ideas and practices of being a mother are intertwined with the patriarchal gender system, which dichotomizes public and private spheres for men and women.

Given that, the woman is considered as a primary caregiver, and motherhood is associated with women universally (Arendell, 2000). Motherhood as an institution is a political and patriarchal construction, which functions to define what it means to be a good and bad mother within a specific context of time and social environment (O'Reilly, 2010). Therefore, mothering practices and what it means to be a mother have been continuously redesigned in response to socio-cultural and economic trajectories within the society.

Consistent with the gender ideology, the ideology of motherhood is historically constructed around the notion of “motherhood mystique” - a set of idealistic discourses and beliefs – which states that motherhood naturally comes to women, effortless and blissful (Johnston-Robledo, 2000). Taken together with gender roles, it asserts that the only way for a child’s healthy development is full-time motherhood, which puts the individual needs of women entirely below it. While the focus of the eighteenth century was centralized on women’s fertility as opposed to nurturing, in the early nineteenth century the ideal of motherhood as a role transitioned into a task, confined by private and exclusively female domain. (Daum, 2017). While the nineteenth century required the participation of women in the labor force, industrialization created full time stay at home mothers out of the labor force (O’Reilly, 2006). After World War II, 1950’s family breadwinner ideal placed several expectations on the roles of women wowed together consumerism and full-time motherhood. In the second half of the century, rise in the cost of child-rearing during the process of the global market economy, along with the response of government policies, laid a burden of balancing work and motherhood onto women without any help (Coontz & Parson, 1997). The term” intensive mothering” was coined by Sharon Hays (1998) to present how the idea of motherhood had become “emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive” (p. 8). As another form of mothering emerged in the 1980s, intensive mothering suggests that a mother should spend quality time with her children, have a scientific understanding of child-rearing, should allocate all of her resources to meet the best practices recommended by “medicalized motherhood” (Litt, 2000). The ideology of intensive mothering has developed into today’s “supermom” persona, a woman who performs the traditional duties as a super wife and flawless mother, while at the same time having a professional career (Daum, 2017). Intensive mothering is still a dominant ideology (Mauthner, 2002), having created the impossible and contradictory standards of being a good mother and the pressure that women feel to accommodate and keep striving for those unreachable goals. (Hays, 1998; Douglas & Michaels, 2005).

Women's expectations of motherhood are profoundly affected by the various myths of motherhood. Rather than espousing their real feelings, women draw on the discourses of supermom who takes the full responsibility of their children in every respect, can cope competing demands of work and motherhood without help, in constructing their experiences. (Butler, 1990; Stoppard, 2000). While this situation is evaluated as symptomatic of the entanglement of neoliberal developments and contemporary motherhood (Mac Robbie, 2013; Orgad & De Benedicts, 2015), on the other hand, the discrepancy between the myth and the reality results in conflict and feelings of inadequacy for mothers. (Choi, et al., 2005). The fear of being seen as a failure is so intense among women as this threatens their sense of self and identity of femininity (Parker, 1995), results in extraordinary efforts of women to portray themselves as supermoms, silencing real feelings and reinforcing cultural norms and ideologies (Butler, 1990). Therefore, besides the patriarchy in the private domain, the transition to motherhood is suspended as it is between the maternal isolation and personal autonomy / the full-time employment and oppressive ideology of supermom. In addition to the material reality of women, the transition women make to motherhood encompasses the role strain, self-doubt, maternal guilt and loss of individuated self, which are associated with depression.

Motherhood is a notion that has never been divorced from economics and politics. Despite the differences among cultures in experiences of gender roles, what it means to be a mother in Turkey is the outcome of both of the similar historical processes and socio-cultural constructions. In Turkey, while "woman" is positioned as the bearer of cultural values, traditions and community symbols, "motherhood" is the essential pillar of a woman's existence in society (Bora, 2001). Dependency is the most desirable future for women, which entails a higher need for the approval of others in the case of motherhood (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2002). The cultural code of motherhood is "sacrifice" and adopting the traditional role of women is critical to be socialized. (Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005). Therefore, women have difficulty in setting personal and interpersonal standards, and have a dilemma of competency versus relatedness in the transition to motherhood (İmamoğlu, 2008).

It is also possible to put forward the perceptions of motherhood that developed in the perspective of nationalism, Islamism and modernism, showed dominant existence in different periods of history. In none of these historical processes, women were considered separate from motherhood, being a wife and practitioner of domestic work. In ancient Turkish cultures, women were equally positioned as men in the social and political sphere, but with the misinterpretation of religious values and the fraying of traditions, women's place in the public sphere gradually narrowed and became the primary component of the private sphere (Yılmaz, 2010). After the Ottoman Empire underwent a social and political transformation, family reform became an urgent need in order to abolish polygyny and restored the nuclear family model in which woman was defined as the primary caregiver. (Parmaksız & Melis, 2012). The nationalist principles redefined motherhood after World War I, and women were seen as the “mothers of the nation”, whose primary responsibility was to bring forth a new nation by raising children for the Republic (Yılmaz, 2010). Even though the principles of equality, democracy, civilization, human rights and the ideal of feminism seems to be re-adopted with the awakening of the national culture, women were forced into the roles of motherhood and femininity through the particular identities such as the bearers of the nation's traditions (İlkkaracan, 2014). During the 1950s, nationalism was compounded by “motherhood mystique” inspired by western countries and the woman’s participation in the public domain was confined by her ability to provide good mothering (Bora, 2001). Thus, women who were assigned to raise Muslim and virtuous individuals during the Ottoman period were assigned to raise individuals who adopted and internalized national values in the period of modernization. Despite the contributions of feminist movements in addressing patriarchal constructions and questioning nationalist-modernist ideals, a critical standpoint against traditional value judgments about gender roles, was perceived as threat by the neo-conservative policies in parallel line with West in which the discourses were centralized around the detrimental effects of working and educated women’s motherhood on family unity, child-rearing. (Parmaksız, 2012; Karakaya, 2017). In a similar line, while the Islamist

approach repositions the woman in the face of modernism, it focuses on the role of being the good wife and strongly supports the limitation of the social position of the woman with the ability of motherhood. (Karakaya, 2017). In the face of Westernization, education of woman is considered important primarily in terms of child rearing and for her presence in the private domain. Rather than being an individual, the value of the woman was discussed through the identity of motherhood and the continuity of society (Atay, 2009). In this context, the presence of women in the public domain was accepted as long as it contributed to the position in private domain. Similarly, for the current situation, existing government politics defines motherhood from a religious and traditional standpoint, which hardly leaves any space for the women's empowerment as mothers.

Regardless of which ideological perspective it is, motherhood has been defined accordingly to the political, economic and socio-cultural changes historically and past & present constructions of motherhood affects women's place in societies and how women experience motherhood. Rather than the individual struggle in oppressive contexts, as Collins (1994) notes, "individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival, empowerment, and communal motherhood" (p. 59). In that sense, recent studies of online gender network affiliations let us see the transformation of virtual communities into catalysts for social change (Gajjala, 2003; Jad & Nouraie-Simone, 2005; Bailey, 2012; Lee, 2013). Virtual communities have emerged not only as a communal support but as one of the crucial spaces of mothering public with a potential of creating solidarity among women (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Johnson, 2015). Women to women support groups in online environments deserve our close attention as a communication phenomenon that is social more than informational. "It was about identifying and communicating with others experiencing similar problems" (Price, 1999, p. 65). There are mixed claims about the effects of virtual communities on mothers. Some assert that those spaces can help empower mothers through the information exchange (Youngs, 2005; Hall & Irvine, 2009), yet others claim that mothers only spaces reinforce the cultural norms of femininity and consumerism (Wilson & Yochim 2017). Studies

demonstrate the various ways in which economic, social and political constructions shaping the offline world, do not disappear online (Herring, 1999; Zoonen, 2001; Kendall, 2002). However, to consider gender experience is predestined by power hierarchies embedded in the construction of online environment is meant to deny and deprive women's ability to think, problematize and politicize and mute their voices of resistance. In this sense, virtual communities offer the social researcher a productive way to think through how women use media & communication technologies in complex ways to make sense of self and the world around them, may resist or reinforce a current social order. In this sense, this dissertation, grounded in the media analysis of everyday use and action, intends to open space not only for moderate discussions on the digital space and maternal empowerment but to discover new conceptual tools for the examination of gender experience in multifaceted contexts.

While this research aims to interrogate political dimensions of co-construction of gender network experience and the mechanisms defining the boundaries of this experience, at the same time, it suggests that it is still important to be aware of the potential for using it in ways to cope with social issues and disrupt the dominant discourses to be able to transform the experiences of motherhood. In cases where familial inequality is prevalent, the woman becomes unconsciously attached to the ideology of motherhood, accept and see the issues derived by the social structure as inevitable and natural (O'Reilly, 2010). On the other hand, women's embodied experiences of pregnancy and motherhood issues are considered as private and excluded from the public sphere (Travers, 2003; Gatens, 2013). Parallel to the concept of "counter-public" by Nancy Fraser (1990), virtual networks offer a space in which discussion of private concerns of women to be held in the public domain proper. From this point forth, the goal is to question the transformational potential of those spaces by examining how the structural source of problems make sense in relation to real-life experience. In light of the themes demonstrated above, it would not be wrong to say that "mother to mother support" and the interaction that occurred in those spaces is more complex than to be explained only by a behavioral

approach focusing on the needs of information and support for new mothers. Although considerable user-centered study is undertaken, relatively a small number of studies offers a complex and holistic understanding of online gender experience in relation to social structures. In response to that, I adopted a critical and interpretative perspective that is necessary for the development of new conceptual categories to make sense of the interactional processes of the virtual venue of mothers with a broader social experience of motherhood. Exploring the question of how women's engagement of online interaction informs their real-life experiences within diverse community contexts can hardly be captured by an all-encompassing representative framework. So, examination of diverse communities encompasses socio-cultural nuances of experience which enables the recognition of inseparable connection and continuities between online and offline world. The qualitative approach of the study clearly exposes the context-specific nature of the phenomenon under investigation, which clearly points to the process of discovery and the inductive practice rather than verification. Whereas constructivism as a broad epistemology underpins my research approach and execution in every aspect, digital ethnography (lasted more than two years), the sequential in-depth interviews with 12 participants (plus interviews with gatekeepers), and sampling and data analysis methods are conducted with a particular focus on their application in the grounded theory methodology framework. Exploring the interactions of online and offline, my social presence in the community as a member and in-depth interviewing with community members are at the center of my ethnographic fieldwork in the interpretation of women's experience of mediated motherhood and the virtual social support that is mapped out from the connections to physical. The empirical knowledge represented by this study is provided from the standpoint of being one of these women and being there in the community, which enabled me to gain social access and view point from the inside of the field setting under investigation. While on the one hand, I maintain the practice of reflexivity as a way of keeping a critical eye on my own influence on the research process, including my interpretation of the data and the way they developed into the theory and on the other hand, incorporation of my autoethnographic accounts as a mother and a

member in tandem with ethnographic fieldwork, lends value and credibility to the knowledge co-constructed with the participants.

Simply stated, in this dissertation, the dominant behavioral and informational approach to the study of virtual community of support in the context of motherhood is seen as problematic because there is a consistent lack of consideration of political, social, ideological meanings and the cultural context of motherhood in the analysis of virtual social support experience of mothers. The current research is problem-driven, and the grounded theory that reflects constructivist epistemology is not only adopted as an overarching methodology that directly speaks to this problem but also serves as a guide to the theoretical interpretative practice taken place in this study. In parallel, the substantive theory of social interaction of the maternal spaces is developed from a multi-dimensional analysis of the social structure of mothering as a critical variable and its interaction with the experience of the virtual social support of motherhood. The substantive theory of the study built in an empirical manner that provides an understanding of the interactional process of maternal empowerment in which vulnerability as a key theoretical concept emerged as the condition of this process.

Even though I consider broadly the findings of previous studies and theoretical discussions related to the investigated subject throughout the different phases of the research process, I do not align myself wholly within an extensive literature review ahead of the data collection because the literature review is considered to be “an open, non-committal, critical and pluralistic dialogue between the grounded theorist, the literature, the data and the ‘emerging’ theory and its concepts and relationships” (Andrew, 2006, p. 206). Accordingly, the literature review is not confined to the particular section of this study, but rather is being treated as an ongoing practice that taken place in the overall research process, analyzed alongside the findings during the data collection and toward the end of the study, used to contextualize the developed theory. On that note, the focus of the preliminary literature review portrayed in Chapter 2 is to situate the study within the existing

body of research related specifically to the virtual community of support in the context of motherhood. This is also where I raise my concerns about the way motherhood is conceptualized in conjunction with the experience of the virtual community of support in the literature. Interrelatedly, Chapter 3 introduces the epistemology, methodological approach and theoretical perspective that underpin my research and shape the way the phenomenon gets studied. In terms of that, the feminist maternal standpoint inconsistent with constructivist epistemology of grounded theory, frames the empirical interests of the researcher. It provides an anchor to demonstrate how the developed theoretical framework contributes to the existing theoretical ideas. The feminist constructivist grounded theory approach sharpens the analytical process of the study by informing the nature of questions that will be asked and in which manner the data collection is carried out. Subsequently, Chapter 4 provides a scheme on the methods used for the data collection, analysis and sampling along with the detailed explanation of their application within the selected methodological framework, to include my reflections on the pilot study as a foundation for the decisions I made regarding the execution during the research process. Following the research design and execution, Chapter 5 demonstrates the multi-layered approach to the analysis built first on the actual experiences of women incidental to their material world of motherhood. Then the experience of virtual social support is considered in a way it intersects with the everyday life of these women as mothers. The analysis grounded in the findings of the study outlines the two interwoven dimensions of motherhood experience-virtual and real- and the characteristics of which are evident in the subcategories of these dimensions. Rather than presenting the conceptual categories of these two experiential dimensions separately, the successive level of analysis establishes the conceptual connection and, as a third dimension of experience, forecasts the consequential relationships of the concepts derived from the analysis of the connective spaces of motherhood through an interactional model of the grounded substantive theory. I returned back to the main question motivating the research in Chapter 6 and discussed how the contextualized understanding of virtual social support contributes to the experience of motherhood and the broader

discussion of empowerment of women as mothers in the context of identity, agency and collectivism. The theoretical understanding of empowerment I developed challenges the conceptualization of vulnerability as weakness and victimization that proves its efficiency in transforming the actions and practices of mothers into a position of agency. Instead, the meaning of vulnerability is revised in a relational milieu of the virtual practices and social relationships women seek to be a part of. Accordingly, vulnerability is reconceptualized and redefined as the condition of the process of empowerment within the developed theoretical framework of this study in a way to extend the existing theoretical ideas. Finally, the contributions to knowledge and theory, limitations of findings and suggestions for further research are represented in Chapter 7. just before my concluding thoughts to the end.

2. LOCATING THE STUDY

The literature dealing with online gender networks in the context of motherhood has been dominated by the concepts of social support, as social networking has been highly associated with maternal well-being, especially in transition to new motherhood. (Crnic et al., 1984; Meadow, 2011). The mental tiredness of woman after becoming mothers is highly related to the uncertainty they feel about childcare (Larsson, M., 2009). Any resources – advice books, pediatricians, parenting sites, previous generations of mothers – that can help to eliminate the ambiguity, becomes a valuable commodity. Since child-rearing is still the primary responsibility of women (Steiner & Bronstein, 2017) and its unchanging centrality for the identity of them, research from various disciplines that focus on parenting/motherhood (Tardy & Hale, 1998; Bernhardt & Felter, 2004; Fisher & Landry, 2007), refer to women as typically primary caregivers and claim they become active information seekers throughout the transition to a new motherhood. Thus, information-seeking not only becomes a function of the daily lives of mothers, but a coping strategy to re-create their identities and develop the new self-conceptions (Deutsch et al., 1988).

Role of information is examined, especially in the provision of social support correlated with social isolation, which is another strong theme across new media studies in the context of motherhood. Enabled by the ICT and computer mediated communication, social interaction in communities was carried out in the virtual space without the condition of locality. Currently, the definition of social support is “any process through which social relations might promote health and well-being” (Cohen et al., 2000, p.4) and that includes any informational support through e-mails and websites, blogs, virtual support groups and communities, and chat rooms.

Research suggests that mothers value and seek support most from similar others (Barclay et al., 1997). While social isolation has always been highlighted as a reality in transition to new motherhood and mother-to-mother contact is not a new channel,

online gender affiliations are the new form of connection for mothers seeking out alternative forms of expertise and social support. Many women, feeling social isolation create their own spaces of dialogue for social support and use experiential knowledge to cope with various social issues and life experiences through the use of digital media and technologies as a way of reaching similar others. (McDaniel, Coyne & Holmes, 2012; Johnson, 2015).

Social isolation and, correspondingly, the need for informational and social support are perhaps most evident and prevalent in mothers as they are the primary caregivers in most cultures. While previous generations relied on the traditional support structures, those structures for new mothers are diminishing. Mothers can no longer depend on traditional circles of wise “other mothers” in postmodern society, and social isolation is on the rise (Collins, 2000). Current literature attributes this to several facts: 1. Loss of geographical networks and family separation (Coontz & Parson, 1997; Litt, 2000). 2. The decline in fertility, delayed entry to motherhood, and early return to work post-birth (Gibson & Hanson, 2013; Drentea & Cross, 2015). 3. Production of “Scientific Mothering”, which has taken motherhood what was once women’s knowledge further away from the domain of woman (Litt, 2000;). Early return to work after giving birth, and declining in fertility, have resulted in families, and neighborhoods in which children and women interacting each other has become less common (Drentea & Cross, 2015). Addressing the similar factors, Gibson and Hanson (2013) also suggest that compared to previous generations, women are less familiar with child rearing as they have fewer opportunities to interact with young children prior to giving birth and with other mothers after birth. In response to social isolation in new mothers, virtual communities on the Internet have become a new site in which mothers engage with each other and experienced knowledge as part of their everyday lives in the process of mother-to-mother social support and enact their shifting identities (Madge & O’connor, 2006; Davis, 2015). A considerable amount of research provides descriptions of how online social support for mothers facilitates social capital by providing a sense of connection and support women in several maternal

outcomes such as post-partum depression, marital conflict and self-esteem (Doty & Dworkin, 2014; McDaniel et al., 2015). Current research of online mother communities presents the evidence of social support which referred to the typology of informational, emotional and instrumental support and addressed as a buffer for stress (Doty & Dworkin, 2014). From a social capital theory perspective, Drentea and Cross (2005) find that a virtual community of mothers increases social capital, especially for women who are socially isolated in transition to new motherhood, and operates through emotional support and informational exchange. Additionally, such social capital functions to reduce the level of anxiety and stress during the period of new motherhood. The study of an online support group for mothers with postpartum depression (Evans et al., 2012), investigating the types of support and their perceived value by mothers, illustrates that emotional support is mostly valued by mothers, which has a positive impact on the child-rearing experiences of women. Emotional support is also followed by informational and instrumental support.

On the other hand, convenience originated from instant access, anonymity, nonjudgmental environment, and geographically heterogeneous audience are consistent themes across studies. In the analysis of a Hong Kong-based group (Happy Land) of working mothers who struggles with family-work life balance, Chan (2008) asserts that this technology-mediated social network concept, playing a role in facilitating social connections, implies weak ties, which enables the generation of more diverse information and knowledge compared to intimate connections of personal networks. Within the scope of the social network theory, examining the online group of Japanese mothers, Miyata (2002) stresses the benefits of weak ties and states that reciprocity is an important motivational factor for women to access virtual communities. Because women have no prior acquaintance, an online collaborative environment enables a more open and free discussion of difficult decisions, troubles and issues of child-rearing that might not be otherwise easily shared, or investigation of topics that might appear taboo in the circles of friends & family (Drentea & Cross, 2015). In a similar vein, research into virtual communities of mothers pays special attention to the concept of identity as

another critical theme. Mother to mother online support groups provides anonymous spaces in which women can feel comfortable to enact their identities as a mother, seek support and declare ideas without the judgement of others, which is described as “non-judgmental esteem support” by Madge & O’Connor (2006). In this respect, sharing of everyday experiences is not only one of the primary reasons for women’s access to those spaces, at the same time it is the main source of emotional support (Madge & O’Connor, 2006; Hall & Irvine, 2009). This is supported by the studies on the online group of women experiencing postpartum depression and working mothers. According to the findings, mothers delineate online gender networks as an emotionally safe, promising and encouraging environment conducive to sharing their negative thoughts about the experiences of new motherhood and discussing difficult decisions of whether or not to return to work post-birth without guilt (Chan, 2008; Evans et al., 2012). The interaction with similar others in virtual communities helps women to validate the normalcy of their feelings and experiences and increase their confidence especially in relation to decision making, through information-seeking and reassurance on their choices (Hall & Irvine, 2009; Gibson & Hanson, 2013). Within this context, virtual community of mothers offers a safe space to test and legitimate their new identities (Johnston-Robledo, 2000), helps them to forge a bond of their old self with the new concept (Gibson & Hanson, 2013) and supports the transition into the role of motherhood (Madge & O’Connor, 2006). In this way, mothers receive and perceive more real support in virtual space, predicted higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression (Chan, 2008; Miyata, 2012).

By the limited number of studies, the importance of collaborative networks in creating a safe space for sharing experiences of mothers is stressed in relation to women’s agency in knowledge production and empowerment. In this respect, Drentea & Cross, (2015), investigating women bulletin boards, and Madge & O’Connor (2006), exploring the benefits of *Babyworld*, an online mother community, provide insight into the potential of those virtual spaces to disrupt scientific narratives of child rearing by moving women away from the male-created

medical establishments. The third study (Johnston-Robledo, 2000), comparing the virtual social support with that experienced face-to-face in mother communities, demonstrates that the virtual communities are most compelling in that they allow women to configure their own technical expertise and develop their own approach of problem-solving; all of which are circulated through online interaction. In this way, women use those spaces to gain access to experiential knowledge over mainstream scientific knowledge.

From an online ecology perspective, the phenomenon of online mother networking is also discussed by a body of work, regarding the benefits and limitations of communication in the online environment. Several studies have found that compared to the limited access to support within traditional networks, instant contact and the ability to access anytime, anywhere offered by computer-mediated communication are essential predictors of participation in those communities. (Madge & O'Connor 2006; Hunting, 2009; Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Drentea & Cross, 2015; Wright, 2016). On the other hand, toxic communication stemming from a lack of face-to-face contact and excessive postings and credibility are the concerns of participants cited by some studies (Doty & Dworkin, 2014). Quite the contrary, according to the findings of the thesis research by Hunting (2009), women in postpartum depression find information and mothering practices shared by mothers more reliable as they are already experienced. Perceived similarity appears to be an essential factor highly associated with social support satisfaction (Dworkin, 2014). Finally, the study of "Mumsnet" (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013), seeking to explain online behaviors of women in mothering networks, differs from the previous studies with its focus on differences of the online behavior of women and men and addresses the new form of femininities emerging in the site from a behavioral approach.

The only study (Kalafatoğlu, 2015) in Turkey on the women's use of online communities provides discussion on pregnant women community with a particular focus on women's communication practices and motivations to participate in the

community. Few other studies looking for social media in the context of motherhood, are concentrated on a specific type of activity – mommy blogging– (Parmaksız & Melis, 2012; Gürçayır Teke, 2014). In the scope of these studies, while the main focus is on the role of mommy blogging sphere in the provision of maternal identity formation, the shared key theme is the bloggers’ identities and their self-concept.

To sum up, first, the majority of discussion around the women’s use of virtual communities in the context of motherhood takes place in the provision of social support. The role and the importance of virtual social support are stressed in relation to its impact on well-being outcomes. The key theoretical framework providing a foundation for those studies is the extended form of Social Capital Theory to an online environment, which is originated out of the communication field. Second, despite a significant scholarship in communication discipline addressing virtual spaces created by and for women, the communication research field currently recognizes behavioral approach explaining motives of use. Motivational factors to participate in virtual communities, such as informational & emotional support, overcoming isolation, experiential knowledge, building self-esteem, are manifested by those studies through a behavioral lens. Third, benefits of computer-mediated communication such as anonymity, availability and drawbacks such as concerns of credibility were discussed in the literature. New media theories such as the strength of weak ties or online community’s theory fell in the scope of social network theory provides a basis for the motives of use in those studies. Lastly, other studies that stand out in the literature are the ones adopting online ecology and highlighting the differences in the availability of online and offline support.

In terms of how those information-oriented spaces function as support environments and mitigate the social isolation brought about by motherhood, online mother networks have been widely studied by the current literature. However, investigations into how these virtual spaces transform women's motherhood experience have been limited to the impact of these settings on the information and

support-seeking practices of mothers. The connection and relation between the virtual environment and real-life have not been established truly in terms of how women encounter motherhood. This study addresses the need for further analysis to explain how the types of activities and meaning-making practices occur during online interactions, affecting women's experience of motherhood and fitting in the complexity of everyday life of mothering.

Even though, oppressive results of contemporary motherhood and patriarchal constructs are well-documented in the feminist studies as the reasons for the suffering of mothers and experienced by women themselves, much of the thinking on the phenomenon of virtual social support is limited to the information function and symptomatic manifestations of motherhood. The impact social structure and historical constructions have on how women experience motherhood is a significant oversight in the analysis. Especially in the context of motherhood, the ways the notion of the virtual community gets studied, the questions asked, and the methods applied leaves the deeper roots of the phenomenon unexamined. Based on this, I argue that contemporary motherhood issues need to be framed in terms of social justice and gender equality for a meaningful and complete discussion. In addition, current studies on the mother-to-mother virtual social support focus on the transition to new motherhood and consider a specific group of new mothers as a cohort. This study, going beyond a specific period or form of motherhood, considers motherhood as an evolving and ongoing process that continues to occur as they and their children attain new milestones. Moreover, the theoretical perspective provides a rationale for adopting such an approach in this study which aspires to involve diverse contexts and forms of motherhood and mothering practices.

Correspondingly, this study questioning the potential of virtual communities in transforming the motherhood experience, aims to provide a discussion in the provision of its mechanisms that insert the influence on the agency of mothers in changing the current structure and perception of motherhood, which is in turn

related to a broader concern of social justice and female experience. This view implies a new conceptual framework and theoretical perspective. From a feminist maternal standpoint perspective, this dissertation is precisely designed to fill this gap.

3. GROUNDED THEORY: EPISTEMOLOGY, THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter represents the epistemological and theoretical perspectives that shape the way the notion of virtual social support community of mothers gets studied, and the methods used to investigate these questions and the lens through which multiple levels of interpretations made by the researcher. As broad epistemology embraced by this dissertation, constructivism underpins every aspect of the research process and execution, and the inductive reasoning is clearly evident in the analytic logic of the analysis process. On the other hand, the theoretical perspective of maternal feminism, aligning with a constructivist epistemology, provides a frame of reference that guides my focus and the questions asked. Figure 3.1 broadly pictures all the aspects of this research design.

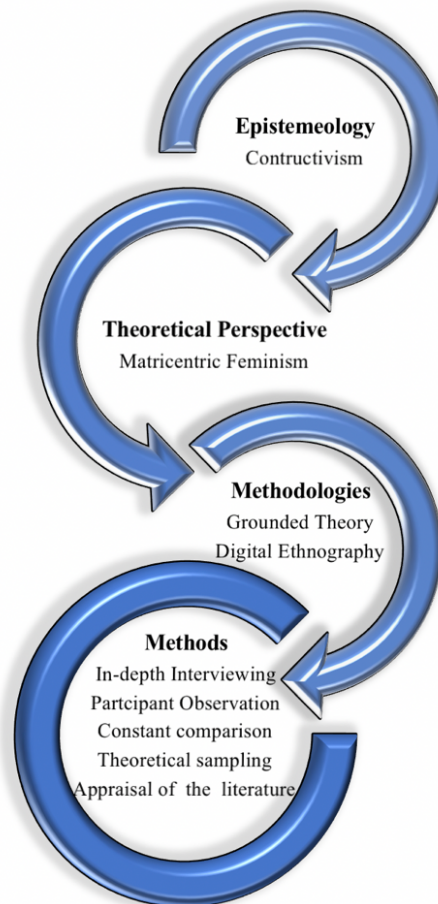


Figure 3.1: Epistemology, perspective, methodology and methods

The grounded theory, adopted as a main methodological approach by this study, widely characterized by the principle of theoretical sensitivity which, “describe modes of a non-deductive use of theories and models in the process of empirically grounded theory building” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019, p.68). The methodology (GTM) puts special emphasis on the emergence of categories from data through social research by taking out the previous theoretical knowledge out to generate fresh ideas, then does adopting a theoretical framework in the grounded theory contradict with the nature of inductive inquiry or imply a deductive logic? Not necessarily.

Grounded theorists (Glaser, 1998; Stern, 1994a) argue against attending to a large amount of data and related arguments prior to the analysis. Charmaz’s constructivist version embraces a similar stance, yet “acknowledges that researchers hold prior ideas and skills” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 48). Consonantly, I began with a specific empirical interest and the general concepts of feminist theory of motherhood, such as identity and agency, which frames those interests. A grounded theory starts with sensitizing concepts accounting for a starting point. The researcher explores those in the field setting that how, to what extent and under which conditions they are relevant to the study (Charmaz, 2005; 2006) or dispensed with the ones proved to be irrelevant. Extant concepts related to the theoretical perspective remain in the background until they earn their way into the emergent analysis.

Accordingly, rather than implying a deductive logic, the theoretical perspective adopted by the study and its related concepts happen to inform the researcher’s worldview and provides a vantage point to demonstrate how the phenomenon under investigation gets studied and the questions asked in this study. As a matter of fact, along with the finalization of the analysis, the theoretical framework takes a new twist as to provide an anchor to locate the specific argument made in the study and to demonstrate how the new substantive theory of the study “*refines, extends, challenges or supersedes*” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 169) extant concepts.

3.1 The Theoretical Perspective Embedded in Methodology

This dissertation deals with the gender network communalism in the context of the highly political, social and emotional issue of motherhood. Although motherhood is not universal, I can see clearly now that the paradox of my own experience of motherhood is absolutely not unique to me and there are responses shared by many others in the online community of mothers (*Araştırın Anneler*), of which I am a member. So, it would not be wrong to say that motherhood is a highly personal experience but a universal construct. We make our choices and experience them under the influence of cultural imprinting, religious and professional codes. I am suggesting that any understanding of experience in the context of motherhood is incomplete without the consideration of how those constructs shape the sense of self and worldview of a woman becoming and being a mother. Even though the repressive results of contemporary motherhood and patriarchal constructs are well-documented in the feminist studies as the reasons for the suffering of mothers, much of the thinking on the phenomenon of virtual social support is limited to the information function and symptomatic manifestations of motherhood. The engagement of socio-cultural and historical constructions of motherhood in the experience of social support is a significant oversight in the analysis of online mother networks. Especially in the context of motherhood, the ways the existing researches study question the notion of the virtual social support community of mothers, and methods applied leaves the deeper roots of the phenomenon unexamined. This does not mean to undervalue previous studies. However, the current measures fail to recognize the complex world of motherhood women inhabit and a full spectrum of power and powerless it represents. Based on this, I contend that the issues that contemporary motherhood is facing need to be framed in terms of social justice and gender equality for a meaningful discussion.

Correspondingly, this study questioning the potential of virtual communities in transforming the motherhood experience, aims to provide a discussion in the provision of its mechanisms that insert the influence. The concept of transformation

concerns the influence related to the agency of mothers in changing the current structure and perception of motherhood, which is in turn related to a broader concern of social justice and female experience. This view implies a new conceptual framework and theoretical perspective to the current analysis. Feminist theory of motherhood/mothering, initiating a feminist maternal standpoint, provides a valuable framework for the theoretical analysis and critical thinking on the women's experience of virtual social support and network communalism in the context. Thus, adopting the feminist standpoint perspective, this dissertation aims to represent an analysis from the feminist maternal standpoint is precisely designed to provide a complete discussion in this sense.

Given that the ideological and political meanings of motherhood which is related with a crucial part of the woman's body, it might be surprising that motherhood has been hardly evoked feminism until recently. In another saying, how someone can be a feminist if she is a mother or vice versa. The idea is that one cannot be a feminist if they are a mother, or vice versa.

Childbearing and nourishing capacity of a woman's body have always been full of contradictions throughout all ages of history. The narrow patterns of patriarchal thought have confined the female body, and the feminist vision has been kept its distance from female biology which has been rendered as hard to overcome destiny rather than a resource for the woman herself (Rich 1995). Therefore, historically, feminism and the study of motherhood have had a complicated and turbulent relationship. Radical feminism tends to reject motherhood based on the perception that it is inherently and profoundly oppressive to women since the female body is taken as a resource for the reproduction of the world of men (Takševa, 2018). As a result, much like the concepts of marriage and nuclear family, motherhood become a nexus of female oppression and the disavowal has seemed more accessible way to liberalization. This anti-maternalistic position may be most starkly apparent in the argument of Shulamith Firestone (2003), who claims that women would never

be genuinely emancipated from patriarchy until they were freed from the subjugation of reproduction.

As a critical aspect of women's experience and an important category in terms of improving the understanding of women's oppression, motherhood has hardly been linked to and perceived as a viable concern of feminism for so long. The situation has created a conjuncture in which motherhood studies and maternal theories have taken place as a theoretically diverse scholarly area outside of the gender (Ross, 2016). Criticism of early feminist writings on motherhood is shown as one of the reasons why motherhood studies are mainly absent from women studies and dampen the spirit for understanding how motherhood is experienced and perceived by women (Gross, 1998). Even in the twenty-first-century feminist scholarship, the disappearance of the motherhood studies is notable and has been well documented by Andrea O'Reilly in her study of *Matricentric Feminism* (2016, p. 185-186).

On the other hand, trajectories of varied mothering practices and women's intersectional and transnational identities have been called into question the central tenet of feminism such as inclusiveness and paved the way for growing body of work on motherhood informed by the feminist theory over the more than two decades. On that note, the book by Adrienne Rich (1995), "Of woman born", in which she makes a critical distinction between the institution of motherhood and the experience of motherhood, can be regarded as a milestone where the blind spot of feminism and motherhood is exceeded. According to Rich (1995), institution of motherhood and institution of heterosexuality defines the limits of our lives and conditions of our choices with prescriptions which are not accounted for what women live in reality. Most of the written and visual knowledge comes to us through the filter of collective consciousness created by those institutions expressing themselves as universal and as so natural as it is not to open any questioning. Rich (1995) further asserts that it is not the experience of motherhood itself that feminists should question and challenge, but the institution of motherhood, which materially and discursively oppresses women by restraining

their motherhood through the impossible standards of idealized motherhood, what Hays (1996) in *“The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood”*, (1996) later called “the ideology of intensive mothering” (p.6). Rich’s separation provided a theoretical space wherein motherhood and related individual subjectivities could be examined separately from the critiques of its institution, envisioning the empowering aspects of motherhood for women.

Although the seeds of those new directions in motherhood studies are to be found in second-wave feminist thought, within the context of third-wave feminism, Ruddick (1995), Rich (1995), Hays (1996), O’Reilly (2010, 2016), among others, have taken a stimulating look at the political, social and historical construction of motherhood, and all address the patriarchal notion of motherhood, not the actual experiences of motherhood, as a source of women’s oppression. By moving beyond the perception of motherhood as a biological imperative and essentialist thought of gender natural individualism defining motherhood as problematic, maternal standpoint opens up a room for the inclusion of motherhood and mothering practices into feminism’s broader concerns of female empowerment and social justice.

Feminist maternal standpoint incorporates a plethora of theories and strategies developed from the mother’s specific needs and issues separate from their larger identity of woman, lately termed as “matricentric feminism” by Andrea O’Reilly (2010). Concordantly, empowerment of woman as a mother has become a central concern of feminist scholarship since the predicated on the distinction of motherhood as a patriarchal institution and mothering as the potential relationship of a woman to her power of reproduction and her children (Rich, 1995; Ruddick, 1995). The theory and the practice of empowered mothering are not replacements of traditional feminist thought but rather the objectives of maternal feminism are consistent with the aims of feminism. Feminist mothering questions the power imposed on women as mothers and stands against a patriarchal culture regulating and restraining the experience of mothering. Though, since the late 1990s O’Reilly

has been studying the development of the feminist theory of motherhood and empowered mothering, and in 2006, she coined the term “motherhood studies to demarcate the scholarship as a legitimate field of discipline” (O’Reilly, 20016, p. 10). Primarily, the feminist theory of mothering is multi-theoretical and grounded in the key concepts of the scholars who have most influenced the development of maternal theory. Among the theoretical concepts, most central to this study include: “Rich’s distinction of motherhood and mothering,” Sara Ruddick’s (1995) “maternal thinking,” Chodorow’s (1999) “reproduction of mothering” Patricia Hill Collins’s (2000) “other-mothering,” Susan Maushart’s (2000) “mask of motherhood”, and Sharon Hays’s (1996) “intensive mothering,” are not limited to but to name a few.

Those theoretical concepts examined within the framework of assumptions and mandates of patriarchal institution of motherhood to explain why and how it functions to oppress and disempower women through their identity and role of motherhood. Those ideological mandated are called the “essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticization of motherhood” (O’Reilly, 2010, p. 33). In a broad sense, maternal feminism theorizes motherhood from the dissociating perspective of experience and role, institution and ideology, identity and subjectivity, which enables the variegation of the realms of motherhood beyond prevailing models imposed by the structure.

What Hays (1996) called “intensive mothering” ideology is oppressive to women because it typically requires women to sacrifice themselves and deny their selfhood. Similarly, this point of view related with an expertization of motherhood is conveyed in the works of Michaels and Douglas (2005) as “new momism”, which gives women the autonomy to choose and control their life, but at the same time dictates that only a biological mother can fulfill the needs of a child. So, while women maintain full-time careers, rather than being freed from domestic responsibilities they need to bring child rearing with professionalism as well.

Patriarchal motherhood assigns women as ideal caretakers of children with full responsibility (in terms of money, time and energy) “but gives them no real power from which to mother” (O’Reilly, 2010, p. 20). In Rich’s (1995) terms, “powerless responsibility” precludes any other options of mothering as they are not morally reprehensible, and denies the agency of woman in describing and determining her own experience of mothering. In contrast, feminist maternal perspective aims to provide women the opportunity with the woman to determine their own experiences by claiming for subjective maternal positions. In this sense, mothering is considered as a site of empowerment and a location in which the woman attains the positions of agency and the authority to determine her experience of mothering.

The public/private divide of gender essentialism characterizes motherhood as a women-specific private unit separate from the public and social world. In this way, patriarchal motherhood leaves women to the fate of socially isolated, alone mothering. It restricts women’s agency and possible ways of changing the current social structure of motherhood and degraded her potentialities. The mandates of motherhood create a constant sense of maternal guilt derived from maternal ambivalence, which is defined as “a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings exist side by side” (Parker, 1995, p. 18). Naturalization prescribes the experience of mothering, assuming that it is driven by an instinct such as an ability rather than a developable skill. Those mandates persist in a situation in which women constantly denies and suppresses what she experiences of motherhood in reality. The mask of motherhood, Maushart (2000) contends, is what “keeps women from speaking clearly what they know and from hearing truths too threatening to face” (p.7). Narrow specifications of good motherhood mask what women experience as reality, restraining them to challenge and lead them to conform to an existing structure.

However, Rich (1995) asserts that motherhood is neither a biological function nor natural, it has a history, has been socially constructed and redesigned in response to

political and economic conjuncture by an institution; so, patriarchal motherhood could be challenged and changed. Departing from this point of view, Sarah Ruddick's (1995) philosophy of "maternal thinking", which separates biological acts and sentiments from the activity of mother work, makes essential contributions to the development of the theory of motherhood. Theorization of "maternal practice" is characterized by three demands: preservation, nurturance and training. Ruddick argues that although the pregnancy as a biological aspect of motherhood and some acts such as breast-feeding and specific feelings can be unique to women, the practice of child-rearing is parental and should be the concern of a family. "Maternal thinking", adopting a gender-neutral approach, dissociates mothering from the identity of motherhood and biology. Maternal feminist standpoint redefines mothering issues and care-giving as a public good beyond the gender essentialism of patriarchal motherhood and deconstructs motherhood as a monolithic identity.

Given the foundations in Rich's and Ruddick's (1995) work, Andrea O'Reilly (2010, 2016) enlarged the theoretical framework with *Matricentric Feminism* concerning what it means to be an empowered mother and committed to how empowered mothering can be realized. What matricentric feminism suggests is not that mothering is all that matters. Instead, O'Reilly, making a distinction between the category of women and women as a mother in relation to political, economic, psychologic issues faced and originated from the identity and role of motherhood, argues that despite the long years of feminism, the woman who is a mother "remains disempowered" (p. 22). Matricentric feminist theory distinguishes itself from the naturalist and essentialist argument of maternalistic stance and agenda. Within this framework, mother work is redefined as a political and social undertaking and oppositional stance against the patriarchal narrative of motherhood. What is particularly noteworthy here is that gender-neutral child-rearing foregrounds the political dimensions and is considered significant, whereas it is different from empowered mothering. Maternal empowerment requires women to seek ways to effect social change not primarily centered on the children but, on behalf of women's themselves (Horwitz,

2003). Whether it is in the domestic or the public sphere, the demands for autonomous power and personal agency need to be accorded to address the needs and concerns of women as mothers. This is considered as the only possible way to develop a concept of self, outside motherhood (O'Reilly, 2010).

Besides the psychoanalytic and liberal feminism, the prominent scholars of maternal feminist theory, informed by the schools of cultural-difference and African-American feminism include *Feminism is for Everybody* (hooks, 2002); *Black Feminist Thought* "other mothering" (Collins, 2002); *South Asian Mothering: Negotiating Culture, Family and Selfhood* (Gonsalves and Sangha, 2013); *Mothers, Mothering and Motherhood Across Cultural Differences* (O'Reilly, 2014). Matricentric feminism challenges essentialism by recognizing the intersectional differences and varied lived context of women in which mothering practices take place. "Good mothers in patriarchal motherhood, for example, are defined as white, middle class, married, stay-at-home moms, while 'good' mothers from a politic of maternal empowerment are drawn from all maternal identities including lesbian, non-custodial, poor, single, older, and 'working' mothers." (O'Reilly, 2010, p. 20). This view is also based on the premise that there is no single type of mothering practice or the experience of motherhood. In relation, O'Reilly (2016) asserts that "our mothering practices evolve and change so our maternal strategies" so we need to "keep a keen eye on the social location and context of mothers at hand" (p. 16). Similarly, this study considers motherhood as an evolving and ongoing process that continues to occur as new milestones are attained by them and their children. Quite the reverse of many studies in the current literature focusing on the new mothers as cohort, this theoretical perspective provides a rationale for my study to go beyond a specific period or form of motherhood and aspires to involve diverse context and forms of motherhood and mothering practices.

On top of it, this point of view proposes that the concepts of autonomy, agency and subjectivity as important components of self-definition, cannot be understood separate from the complex social collective within which they are realized. This

premise has significant implications for the investigation of motherhood in terms of experience, identity and agency and policy (Takševa, 2018), which, I chose to use it as a conceptual framework for this dissertation and puts this study at the intersection of motherhood and gender studies within a theoretical context informed by foundational terms of feminism such as empowerment.

Fundamentally, the central tenet of matricentric feminism is a call for the full authority and agency of a woman over her mothering experience. As a practice, theory, and form of activism, it seeks to enact a maternal identity and to implement other possibilities of mothering practice, which is against motherhood. Whereas Rich (1995) contends that mothering can be a site of empowerment even socio-cultural contexts where the patriarchal structure restrains woman's experience to the greatest extent, the theory of empowered mothering emerges from the question of what makes possible the maternal empowerment for women from various cultural positions, which is missing Rich's discussion. The response of matricentric feminism underlies the definition of empowerment, which refers to "naming, analyzing and challenging oppression" (Bernard & Bernard, 1998), and this is only possible through critical consciousness, which comes with "gaining control, exercising choices, and in engaging in collective social action" (p. 46). Accordingly, O'Reilly (2010) argues that the characteristics assigned to empowered mothering – "agency, authenticity, autonomy and advocacy-activism" (p. 90) – reveals new maternal identities and practices that enable women to resist and change the patriarchal motherhood from various cultural positions. Within this framework, the notion of "agency" is explained by Hallstein as "the ability to influence one's life, to have a power to control one's life" (2010, p. 698). On the other hand, "authenticity" as an ethical term, which is being honest with one self about mothering, reflects one's own beliefs and opinions on her decisions by keeping her mind free from the dominant values (Butterfield, 2010; O'Reilly, 2006). Finally, the notion of "advocacy-activism" refers to any formal or informal resistance or struggle, if not a success. Grappled with the knotty question of motherhood, the theory of maternal empowerment foregrounds a state of mind

inspiring a sense of agency and developing a critical consciousness toward the dominant values, discourses and constructs to interrupt their perpetuation of those in patriarchal motherhood.

It is my contention that we are far too preoccupied with meeting the expectations of the dominant culture of motherhood and its specifications imposed on us that most of the time, we are hardly aware of the implicit causes of the oppressiveness of our experience, its effects on the complex realities of our lives and the consequences for our children. In respect to this, Rich (1995) asserts that any breakdown of the ideological constructions of motherhood would not simply remove gender roles but, would profoundly alter the childhood relationship of the whole society in the face of patriarchy. This assumption is clearly depicted through the *Reproduction of Mothering* by Chodorow (1999), who seeks to answer the question of male dominance and why the full responsibility of mothering is undertaken by women without any question. Chodorow (1999) states that the maternal subjectivity is a “relational self” acquired by women through their own mother’s mothering, which she defines as “reproduction of mothering”. The same gender effect causes women’s perception of the daughter as a continuation of herself. Girls, when they grow up, experience themselves as a continuation with their mothers and bring this sense of relational self, acquired from their mothers, to their own mothering. According to Chodorow (1999), this is problematic from two aspects; first it works against the development of authentic autonomous self, and second, it creates deficiency in power and authority if the sense of self is defined by mothers devalued in cultures in which the motherhood is considered as the one and only role of women. Chodorow (1999) argues for exclusive female mothering role differentiation based on gender, but in this way, boys obtain “the definition of masculinity itself” (p. 185), which is superior to and distinct from femininity and “produces sexual inequality” (p. 214). In contrast with the patriarchal system, the theory of empowered mothering redefines mothering as a site of political and social undertaking in which mothers take role in social change in the private domain

through raising empowered daughters and in the way that they raise their sons, and in the public or the world at large through maternal activism.

Including myself and many women around, many women have hard to define emotions in terms of where to put their autonomous self in the society, as they are suspended between their maternal feelings and the need of self-preservation. So, whether they are biological mothers or not, queer, lesbian, single or married, working or not, either with a sense of giving life to another or rejection of becoming a mother at all; the question of “what do we want for ourselves?” is still with them. From the perspective of maternal feminist theory, one of the most important things women can do for another is to expand their sense of possibilities of new ways to exist as a woman and being a mother. In a parallel vein, this study is an endeavor to unmask motherhood within a specific cultural context. The phenomenon of virtual support community, as a realm of our consciousness or unconsciousness as mothers, provides an opportunity either to examine the subconscious notions of our cultural constructions of motherhood to be able to revisit its processes or to illuminate how mothering could be a site of agency for women in which cultural and social change is made possible.

While maternal feminism provides a theoretical perspective for exploring women’s subjective experiences concerning becoming and being a mother; constructivist epistemology of the grounded theory provides this dissertation with a framework in which the description and theorization of our own experiences with maternal subject positions are made possible.

3.2. Feminist Constructivist Grounded Theory

Rather than as a research methodology, the term grounded theory is commonly used by researchers to refer to an inductive mode or specific method of qualitative analysis, as it can be applied to researches employing various methodologies such as ethnography (Charmaz, 2006; Pickard A., 2007). However, it is both the

framework concerned with the generation of a new theory and the product of the inquiry-the middle range theory built through the application of systematic approach and conceptual development. Similarly, this study employs grounded theory as an overarching methodology guiding research design and execution in a holistic sense beyond a method of inquiry.

Grounded theory was originally developed from methodologies by Glaser and Strauss (1965a;1967), deriving from the objectivist tradition. However, following the shifts in the epistemological foundations of the original version, grounded theory has taken various forms (Strauss, 1987; Corbin & Strauss 1990; Charmaz, 2000; Bryant, 2002; Charmaz & Bryant, 2008). This study specifically adopts constructivist grounded theory approach, which is the most recent variant of the methodology.

Grounded theory methodology (GTM) was first put by Glaser & Strauss (1967) with an idea of developing a structurally relevant social theory from research grounded in data, which basically contested the deductive inquiry and the prevailing views that qualitative methods were not systematic enough to generate a theory. In defining the grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss address two main concerns through their systematic approach to research; one is to legitimize qualitative inquiry as a credible and rigorous methodology on its own right, and the second is the divide between research and theory in the contemporary social science inquiry. They propose systematic qualitative analysis with an intention to construct abstract explanations for social processes and the development of a new theory grounded in empirical data through induction rather than focusing on the verification of or deducing testable hypotheses from existing ones. By inverting the positivist approach, it has been suggested that “The discovery of Grounded Theory” (1967), moved qualitative inquiry beyond description into the realm of explanatory theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006; Selden, 2005) and was considered a major force in provoking the “qualitative revolution” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

However, based on the respective theoretical backgrounds of Glaser and Strauss, GTM has taken different forms since its creation, indicating the shift in epistemological position within these versions. The characteristics of two contrasting schools of thought in sociology are evident in the methodology. On one hand, in Glaser's logical systematic approach, rigorous codified methods and epistemological assumptions echoes positivist roots, and on the other hand, "the notions of human agency, emergent processes, social and subjective meanings, problem-solving practices, and the open-ended study of action" (Charmaz 2006, p. 7) pervades the grounded theory method and reflects pragmatist philosophical tradition adopted by Strauss. The alternative path taken by Strauss in collaboration with Corbin (*Basics of qualitative Research*, 1990) is also considered as a great departure from objectivist tradition, which accelerated this direction toward verification. The aftermath of this divergence exerted profound influences on the development of the method, culminated in a variant of the approach and divergent ideas that moved the method far away from its positivist roots, which can be clearly traceable in the classic version (referred to as pure grounded theory). To put it more simply, a considerable development that GTM has undergone for almost five decades can be contextualized as part of the theoretical and methodological discussions of the interpretive turn. Basically, the several distinct approaches to grounded theory in use today can be specified as; *Glaserian* GT as positivist and objectivist, *Straussian* GT as interactionist and interpretivist and the most recent version of the method deriving from the interpretive tradition is *Constructivist* GT of Kathy Charmaz embracing the epistemological perspective of constructivism. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) argue for viewing this complex heritage of GTM landscape as a "family of methods" where there is no intention to create an orthodoxy for the grounded theory, but with diverse approaches underpinning the different epistemological and ontological backgrounds of the researcher who adopts it. It should be noted that any researcher contemplating grounded theory methodology needs to grasp this complexity to be able to make informed choices and articulate the rationales supporting them, however it necessitates a profound understanding of essential properties that are common across the family of method

and setting apart GTM from any qualitative data analysis. First is the constant comparative method serves as the foundation of the data analysis during the each stage of the inquiry, second is the theoretical sampling not for representativeness but aimed toward theoretical saturation, and the third, which is an equally significant aspect of GTM, is a focus on the theory construction through theoretical saturation of categories rather than deduction from substantive verifiable findings. (Hood, 2007).

A lot more features, including each of the distinctive characteristics, are particularized in the discussion of the research design and conduct of the study but, I will return first to the rationales for adopting grounded theory as an overarching methodological framework for the execution and design of this study. Today, various solidarities, along with the common life experiences and social issues lead us to differing forms of virtual social support communities with diverse agendas, values and motivations. This provides a rationale to demonstrate two critical points; the first one is the context-specific nature of the online social support that should not be extracted from the broader social reality, and the second is a contextualized understanding of the phenomenon that necessitates differing analytical, conceptual categories. In parallel, this study aims to capture nuances of gender network communalism within a specific culture; Turkish society, and a specific community; Facebook user group *Araştırın Anneler* as a case study with a particular focus on the context of “motherhood”. Concordantly, grounded theory focuses on the notion of experience within a clearly defined context and a particular setting or a community of practice (Charmaz, 2006; 2009).

Next, this inquiry considers “virtual social support” and gender network experience as a communication phenomenon, which has no clear definition in the literature. Multi-dimensional nature, contradictory use and meanings of interaction in women-only communities, makes it challenging to position the study within the spectrum of existing media and communication research paradigm. Exploring the question of how women’s engagement of online interaction informs their real-life experiences

within a specific socio-cultural context and community can hardly be captured by an all-encompassing representative framework. Even though existing communication theories provide a basis for motives of use and motivational clusters, there is no substantive communication theory in existence concerned with the impact of those virtual spaces as well as to explain complicated use and motivations. Grounded theory, facilitating the development of substantive or formal theory with its broadening far beyond description, is well suited to an inquiry concerned with the explanation of a delimited phenomenon or problem in specific areas (Glaser & Strauss, 2006) and theory generation is appropriate for the intended outcome of the proposed study.

According to the logic of GTM, a social process defined within the framework of the grounded theory may cut across varied substantive areas where the empirical setting or problems the analysis most closely aligned, which raised the generality and scaled the theoretical heights as to move a substantive theory toward the realm of formal theory. However, a grounded theory inquiry in a particular area mostly result in a substantive theory, an explanatory theoretical framework, which draws a concrete relationship between analytic categories on a conceptual level in a way to provide a handle on the studied experience and an explanation of a social process or problem. (Charmaz, 2006). Motherhood experience is complex and multi-dimensional engagement with the virtual social support, so this analysis focuses first on the experience of motherhood, and individual meanings of support in the context, and the following considers how a person's feelings and emotions of motherhood are tied to the current experience of the virtual social support community. While this study offers a set of well-developed concepts related to this relationship, the intention here is not only to interpret those concepts, but to provide a processual relationship among them within an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict the mechanisms of this interaction insert the influence. In this sense, how women experience motherhood and support in their everyday life become variables on which outcome of the virtual platform rested.

Grounded theory is a method of developing theoretical interpretations and explanations to understand the world we study in which, we make analytic sense of our participants' meanings, experiences and actions through the conceptual categories that emerged from data rather than pre-conceived notions. In a similar vein, the position of this dissertation proceeds from the sensibility of diverse and multifaceted identities of women and their differential reaction and negotiation to media according to their socio-cultural context of subjective existence. This implies adopting an insider perspective in research in which conceptual categories cannot be determined ex-ante, but emerge from particular usage and context. Therefore, it is a process of discovering conceptual categories and mechanisms of online interaction that inserts the influence on the motherhood experiences of women. This points to an inductive practice where data is discovered, and categories emerge from data rather than verification, and the grounded theory employs inductive analysis and is focused on discovery rather than verification.

Scholarly tradition underpins the researcher's stance on the research subject, defines which aspect of the phenomenon she/he will consider. As a researcher interested in the experience of mother work, I contend that while the experience of motherhood is complex by itself, its engagement with gender network communalism and mothers' various forms of use and engagement of the digital publics in everyday life points to a multi-dimensional nature of the analysis. In respect to this, the attention of the study has stemmed mainly from what phenomenology defines as lived experiences of individuals, encompassing the online habitat under scrutiny and the larger social world, which are the two fronts of this study that cannot be considered separate. My dual identity as a researcher and one of the members of the virtual social support network of mothers under scrutiny affords an insider perspective to the research, which enables this social access essential for this study.

With this respect, even though there are distinct schools of grounded theory with common key characteristics, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), is

particularly appropriate for this study because I am the part of the processes that I am aiming to analyze and I prefer to make my situation explicit within the group rather than ‘othering’ them.

The key difference between constructivist grounded theory and its predecessors is constructivist/constructionist epistemological perspective which is also embraced by this study. In contrast with the objectivist grounded theory methodology considering that there is an external reality, Charmaz’s variant allows for the co-construction of reality by participants and the researcher, and propose knowledge construction through the interaction with others and by the experiences of individuals.

Early variant of the methodology residing in the positivist tradition treats data as real in and of themselves waiting for the discovery of the observer, rather than a process of production. As a continuation of this view, within this objectivist framework, a theory is discovered and emerged from data with the objective of prediction (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1967). On the contrary, within the constructivist framework, the theory is created and constructed. So, construction is at the heart of the perspective on theory which emphasizes understanding rather than explanation. Glaser& Strauss that gouges out the social context in which data emerge and the interaction through which participants and the researcher co-create the data. On the contrary, grounded theory and its related methods are treated by Charmaz (2006) as “social actions that researchers construct in concert with others in particular places and times” (p. 144).

Departing from this point of view, the constructivist approach, beyond the replication of the experiences of participants, takes a reflexive stance toward the research process in which data and analysis are socially constructed through interpretations of both the researcher and the participants. Therefore, the constructivist conception of theory recognizes that the resulting theory is the interpretation of the participants but depends on the researcher’s view (Bryant,

2002; Charmaz, 2006). In other words, a researcher with a reflexive stance keeps a close eye on the evolution of her/his theory. Such a view implies a contextual nature of the analysis, such as time, culture, situation and relational state of facts to values (Hall&Callery, 2001). Furthermore, researching women's online gender experience of virtual community takes us deeply into their existence as mothers in the real and larger life worlds to explore how virtual social support is experienced, how knowledge is created or disappears, how they make meaning and the derived meaning inform them, its role and impact on their motherhood experiences within their wider environments. On the other hand, through a socio-cultural lens, the study seeks to understand how this experience is co-constructed within a specific cultural context and a community. Resonating with the orientation of Hakken's (1999) in digital ethnography, the socio-cultural lens moves the study beyond the network related interactions that occurs at the "micro level" and enables an analysis of the community dynamics reproduced during online interactions at the "meso-level", and furthermore, makes possible to ask questions regarding the political and ideological dimensions, such as how power enacts itself through and what might defines the boundaries of this experience, at the "macro level". So, it requires simultaneous attention to the both experienced world within the community and within the larger sociality.

My focus, towards carrying the study to a phenomenological orientation, considers the experienced and habited world of an individual as a whole, and aligns with Charmaz's (2006) treatment of theory, which contains strong interpretivist leanings, acknowledging subjectivity and dialogue, theorizing the connections between local worlds and larger social structures. In parallel, the contextual nature of the constructivist analysis extends as to incorporate larger and hidden positions in which the studied experience is embedded and the study of experience takes place. Thereby, "differences and distinctions between people become visible as well as the hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate such differences and distinctions" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 146).

Far beyond the behavioral approach to the phenomenon of virtual social support, the intention here is to build a different sort of analysis emphasizing the importance of the broader socio-cultural context within which motherhood is being realized and explore the interaction of subjective experience of motherhood with the virtual social support community in relation to the ideology of motherhood. In respect to this, this qualitative study that calls into question the transforming potential of those spaces in the provision of the ability to provide support for social change from the perspective of feminist theory of motherhood does distinguish the different forms of motherhood specific to different cultures and their impact on what constitutes empowerment.

On the other hand, the feminist perspective of this study, including gender as a socially constructed category, interplays with a social identity of motherhood, which comprises the particular experience and concerns of women, in addition to providing an additional rationale for the type of methodological approach to grounded theory that I subscribe to. Several numbers of studies with a range of topics incorporating grounded theory approach into feminist research provide an example of how both can productively co-exist in the same study, deepening and enriching the analysis (Kasper, 1994; Ancheta, 2002; Reed, 2003; Mamo, 2006; Allen, 2011; Wetton et al., 2013).

Social constructionist formulation of GT recognizes the agency and own subjectivity of the researcher in an analysis (Clarke, 2007), which is particularly the case in this study and where feminist research considers gender as a socio-cultural construct. The axiological practice, which is the key characteristic of feminist approach to research, can be found in constructivist grounded theorists' engagement with the research process and their attempt to become aware of their standpoint, presuppositions and how their values affect the evolvement of the theory. (Hall & Callery, 2001; Bryant, 2002; Thorne, et al., 2004). The mutual understanding of objectivity within these methodologies can be explained through the concepts of "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1991) or "strong objectivity"

(Harding, 1993), which locate the origin of the research's objectivity in the researcher's awareness of and reflection on her/his position. With respect to this, grounded theory offers tools including constant comparison method and memo writing that fosters reflexivity about the researcher's own standpoint as well as of the participants in a way considered as necessary by feminist standpoint.

Additionally, drawing on the constant comparison method, grounded theory scrutinizes various particulars and cases to cover diverse constructions of same situation in the pursuit of conceptual and theoretical saturation. As a critical feature of conceptual density, it controls the tendency of importing pre-conceived ideas or extant theoretical codes to the analysis and ensures that the emerging concepts, categories and the theory are grounded in the data. Including various cases in different contexts is crucial in the sense that it supports the researcher to become aware of his/her position about the topic, but also demonstrates that grounded theory methodology aligns the overall study with the goals shared by feminist standpoint perspective embracing complexities and multifaceted understanding of social behavior emerged from subjectivity.

This study designates women's everyday experiences of virtual community in the context of motherhood as primary site of inquiry and grounded theory opens up a space for mothers 'subjective experiences, which are often overshadowed by the dominant culture's narratives of motherhood. The sensitivity of grounded theory to multiple perspectives and truths advances feminist standpoint perspective of this study in the pursuit of exploring subjugated knowledge, with its attention to raw data and commitment to provide a route to see the new beyond the obvious through iterative praxis.

Simultaneous data collection and analysis, informing each other, helps our analytic grasp of data takes form. The key feature of saturation, expecting the topic to be fully explored, spurs the researcher to pursue emergent questions, seek specific data and engage in a successive level of analysis to fill out the gaps and refine the

categories to reach an abstract construction of the studied experience. Stated simply, systematic yet flexible guidelines allow the fluidity of grounded theory interviews. Different questions emanated from the data collected can be posed to participants and allows a new understanding within the existing. Based on this, while the principles of feminist perspective sharpen this analytical process, what the value grounded theory approach brings to a study is a new understanding, which either by extending, enhancing or challenging, contributes to the depth and richness of the existing theoretical framework.

Another alignment can be found in the intersection between constructivist grounded theory's processual emphasis and feminist theory's commitment to social change and justice. Even though originators of grounded theory were criticized for their decontextualized analysis and not addressing power in micro contexts (Burawoy, 1991), Charmaz' s insights on advancing social change (2005) and Clarke's (2005, 2006) *situational analysis* extends the grounded theory with the critical analytical techniques for analyzing social processes in the direction that fall under the social justice rubric. A contextualized grounded theory stresses coding on actions and puts emphasis on processes rather than on individuals to be able make connections between those actions and social conditions that foster them as well as the others hinder. Such efforts foster the conceptualization of relationship between individual or collective experience and a major event – it is motherhood and the experience of virtual support in this case – in an attempt to locate this relationship in larger structures and understand how these structures work in a theoretical sense. Grounded theory serves to elucidate the concerns at the core of human experience and seeks to explore the new in their links to larger issues to promote social transformation (Charmaz, 2005; 2006). To sum up, constructivist grounded theory's approach is congenial with feminist standpoint theory “in its attention to raw data (the voices of marginalized populations), commitment to iterative praxis, which allows for the constant reexamination of existing data, and ability to empower research subjects” (Hesse-Biber & Flowers2019, p. 499).

I juxtapose positivist and interpretive variants of grounded theory as to clarify that our conceptions of theory and differing assumptions that underpins constructivist approach to the grounded theory necessarily influence the research design, methods, and in which manner data collection will be carried out. In this sense constructivist grounded theory is both a guide to interpretive theoretical practice and a methodological framework, and this study adopting the combination of both grounded in the real stories of women about their experiences and my insider observations of the virtual community of mothers.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN & EXECUTION

This study utilizes the combination of digital ethnography and in-depth interviews within the constructivist grounded theory framework. The main data collection technique used in this study is digital ethnography that differs from a participant observation approach in that I focus especially on a specific community within a delimited space in the virtual world. Therefore, the research boundary is defined by a community space, not by the personal social media contexts of individuals or their broad social media space.

“Ethnography means recording the life of a particular group and thus entails sustained participation and observation in their milieu, community, or social world” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 21). I believe that the method is well suited to the exploration of gender network experience and its relation to real-life context as it enables to move from passive observation, gain an insider perspective of studying milieu and understand the taking for granted assumptions of members within the group.

As concluding the study with a combined method of data collection has far more to draw on, in-depth, semi-structured intensive interviewing is selected as the secondary data collection strategy. While being a full member of the observed group helped me to conduct participant observation in the setting, in-depth interviews yield rich data and allows me to enter the situations of participants to the extent and the exploration of their experience of both motherhood and the virtual community support. More importantly, in-depth interviews provide them with an opportunity to describe their experience in their own words and enabled a dialogue – in which the meanings are co-constructed with participants – for such a study with the primary goal of promoting understanding.

Considering my position as one of the community members since 2018, I had a chance to observe the setting and the structure of *Araştırın Anneler* for more than two years before giving a start to data collection through in-depth interviews. This

means that I have collected enough background data about the processes, the setting and range of themes to have ready to form the interview questions. The fact remains that I engaged in detailed, sustained observation, and digital ethnography has served to inform each of the multiple-sequential interviews throughout the research process. I especially utilized my observations and the directions I obtained by digital ethnography during the interviews to improve the category development in the analysis and further my understanding of emerged categories.

On the other hand, the grounded theory employs an inductive approach in which the theory emerges from the process of data analysis, which co-occurs with data collection. The methodology provides flexible yet systematic guidelines for data collection & analysis, underpinned by the logic of constant data comparison. The researcher starts with early data, compares it with another segments and codes of data. Results of the numerous comparisons inform the data we wish to obtain next and the sampling strategy. The simultaneous data collection and analysis, a key element of grounded theory, allows a revision and reconfiguration of the data collection approach at every stage of the inquiry. Regarding this, the data collection in the study is planned to occur in two phases; pilot study and main study.

The pilot study was an important consideration as it allowed me to reflect on the research design and test the interview questions. Especially writing brief notes following each interview in the pilot study allowed me to think analytically and critically about the effectiveness of research methods, to become more self-aware of my skills and my standpoint as a researcher. While there were no major changes to the research design and execution, I took an opportunity to examine my assumptions based on the site observation and my experience as a member and explore the boundaries and scope of the phenomenon under investigation. The pilot study interviews brought new directions to pursue, so I returned back to the site observation to check out those. As the initial interviews provided rich data, I decided to conduct follow-up interviews with the pilot study participants and included them in the data set of the main study.

The observational data includes my field notes primarily collected to inform the initial and follow-up interviews at every stage of the data collection & analysis. In terms of that, observational data provided with me particular occurrences, actions and broad topics to explore with the individual members in the interviews. Reversely, I also pursued the spoken accounts of interview participants during the periods of observation in the setting to explore the gaps and tensions in the data and accordingly prepare the follow-up interviews, which is totally inconsistent with the constant comparison logic of the grounded theory.

It should be noted that the analysis process includes the observational data; however, it is not collected with the intention to code as I coded and analyzed interview transcripts. From the very beginning, the coding process of pilot study interviews produced certain tensions between the spoken accounts of interview participants and my written observations of the setting, which made it difficult to explain the contradictory aspects of the categories in general terms. The observational data that includes the practices, processes and the content posted by members are collected to exemplify the analytic insights in the analysis. Therefore, the intention with collection of observation data is not to code, but rather to incorporate the field note content into the analysis for the contextualization of the entire study and the interview data.

Consequently, the data analyzed in this study includes 1. In-depth first interviews with 12 members including pilot study participants and the father who is the only men accepted to the group, 3. In-depth follow-up interviews with 10 participants, 4. Fieldnotes about the setting and conversations (written records of observations based on the researcher's experiences of being in the network and screenshots of activity took place during the conversations of members). I also conducted an interview with the admins of the *Araştırma Anneler* – two women who are mothers themselves – with an intention to gain an insight of their purpose and the story of the group from their points of view.

4.1. Digital Ethnography as a Tool

Digital ethnography, situated under the interpretivist tradition, is a method of “representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story” (Underberg & Zorn, 2013, p. 10). The field/setting I study is an OSS (open-source software, but closed group) community within an interactive social media platform, Facebook, where the private /public spheres become critical for the research. Given the level of researcher participation in the studied milieu is the central design characteristic of the different observer roles, I embraced the participant as observer role, acting as being a full group member of the online community. This means that the members of *Araştırın Anneler* were got acquainted with me as a researcher and the purpose of my research observation. A more participative approach as such, maintaining the traditional ethnographic standards, aligns with the arguments of leading grounded theorists who assert that “long-time everyday immersion in a research site is a necessary condition for the development of grounded theories” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2007, p. 498). In terms of that, I have been a community member since 2018 and following a passive phase of observing the posts and interaction taking place in the community, commonly known as lurking, and I followed a more interactive phase of engaging in conversations by comparison to the previous phase for more than a year, which originated with the research process.

Being at the same setting and experiencing the same situations with the individuals subject to the phenomenon under investigation enabled me to achieve intimate familiarity with the subject of the study and deepened what I learned of the studied world, which I believe in turn provides a big advantage compared to an outsider. However, my approach of participant observation role entailed the risks of overidentification with the community members, which is referred to as “going native” (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2005). This provides another rationale for combining the data collection method with the in-depth interviews. Including in-depth interviews made it possible to increase the accuracy of my findings by

compensating for the risk of misinterpretations. Furthermore, time to time I employed de-centralization and re-centralization through more observation and less interaction to eliminate the possibility of going native and risk of reactivity during the observation process. My personal history as a member and a mother with the community of *Araştırın Anneler* required constant awareness of my positionality as a researcher through a reflexive move. Regarding this, I tried to write short notes focusing on my experiences of being in the community while keeping the digital field notes such as observational data, including the screenshots of activities taking place in the setting separate from the reflective data. This I believe was an important consideration as my impressions of the setting could differ from the actual situations experienced by the individuals, so it led me to make more comparisons and check my ideas about them in the setting in order to build an analysis grounded in the data.

BOX. 4.1 A Sample of reflective field notes from December 20th, 2020

A typical day of the community from morning till night gives me a sense of the daily rhythm of mothering, including particular modes of engaging in challenges, hopes, joy and fears of being a woman and a mother. Beyond these often seemingly ordinary everyday interactions, I have had the chance to meet women who continue to be a mother in non-ordinary contexts. Today I had an interview with one of these women who is a mother of two-years-old girl who has recently lost her second spouse in an accident. What I mostly felt was how much she inhabits this virtual community with profound ambivalence. While she does not appreciate any of the myriad ways of community that support women (which is totally different from my observations and the speaking accounts of other participants), she is highly annoyed by the online environment where she asserts that the mode of interaction taking place in the community tends to exacerbate the hurts and complexity of life. Although not sharing an exemplary experience with me, when I provided with her an example of the collective action of support that standing out in my mind and taken place for a mother with a similar experience with herself, she stated that

people who could get support are the ones who have friends in the community. I totally feel clueless about why she prefers to participate in such an environment where she feels as such. Is this just because participation in a network of mothers function as a template for belonging to contemporary motherhood? Can the social relations established in the group may become the source of inequalities in receiving response or support from others? I think that different women not only have different points of view but may also have competing agendas. I need to check my ideas about what she defines as problematic in the setting and the other research participants.

Digital ethnography principles and practices are set out around key concepts including “experiences (what people feel); practices (what people do); things (the objects that are part of our lives); relationships (our intimate social environments); social worlds (the groups and wider social configurations through which people relate to each other); localities (the actual physically shared contexts that we inhabit and events (the coming together of diverse things in public contexts)”(Castriotta, et al., 2017 p. 14-15). Among them, the concept of “things” in relation to consumption and circulation of things in the form of material support less directly engages in the inquiry with the question of what form of economies served by this technology enabled virtual space and becomes another aspect of the ethnographic research regarding the activities taking place in the community. Yet, I examined how the members feel about and view this virtual space and experience this new mode of communication due to their collaboration and collectivity. I focused both on how people feel and what women do with this environment, searched for the routines taking place in everyday life of which this virtual space is a part of, thus feeling and doing (experience and practice) became the part of the same research in this study.

In a broad sense I conducted digital ethnography to interrogate the produced and shared knowledge by mothers in the community and the derived meanings of them. Rather than making generalizations about the women’s experience of virtual social

support, the intention here is to understand why the content created here matters for them and how the co-created content and the derived meanings of them becomes a player in the experience of everyday motherhood within the current structure of it. Based on this, when a researcher engages in digital ethnography “self-identities, social relations, and the structure of cyberspace are all relevant areas of inquiry” (Kaur-Gill& Dutta, 2017 p. 2, also see in Hakken, 1999). Technologically enabled spaces may cut across educational or societal divisions, hierarchies, boundaries of socio-cultural constructions or power, all of which are played out more obviously in our physical spaces. Within this scope, motherhood represents a category of experience in which the woman’s own knowledge of motherhood is hijacked by the voices of expert culture and the language of our pains and pleasures of this experience is restricted by the socio-culturally proscribed norms of motherhood (Ruddick, 1995; O’Reilly, 2016). Particularly given that, I focused on the spoken and unspoken elements of this virtual space including the questions of how power enacts itself through, how the media is used in ways that may challenge or reproduce the institutions of motherhood. At the macro level, the principal aim of the digital ethnographic research of the study was to examine whether or to what extent everyday life of motherhood in the virtual space is experienced “as radically different and separate from the real” (Hine, 2000, p. 8), that is for representing the interplay of the virtual and the physical to be able to mention any kind of transformation in the perception, practice, or social relations of motherhood.

To expand even further, one of the most critical processes subject to the digital ethnographic work in this study is to understand how women integrate this mode of communication and interaction in their maternal identities. It is about whether or how this online collaborative environment allows an individual to make sense of herself and re-construct new identities of motherhood in the real-life context. Finally, the co-presence of women in the digital space constitutes a social world in which contemporary social relations are established through community practices and collective activities. At the micro level analysis, how this social world is constituted through the co-presence of these women and the community dynamics

produced within the nature of online environment is another aspect that I focused through participant observation.

Though, the main tool of digital ethnography I used in this study is participant observation, besides the observational field notes. I also utilized digital archival materials for my analysis in the form of previous posts and comments on the various topics within the community thread to be able to cluster similar themes, while checking out and identifying patterns consistent with the spoken accounts of in-depth interview participants.

While the ethnographic origins of grounded theory methodology in the field and its emphasis on the social interaction makes it “a good methodological and theoretical fit for an ethnographic research engagement” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2007, p. 496), grounded theory ethnography takes a different form in the way the significance it gives to the studied social process rather than the description of the studied milieu (Charmaz, 2006). Concordantly, this study takes a more analytic and processual approach rather than descriptive to understand the relationship between the central concepts of the ethnographic method mentioned above and through what kind of social process are constituted. In terms of that, grounded theory analyzing the interaction, which is also the concern of ethnography, provides guidelines to generate theoretical framework explaining these interactional processes. Besides its emphasis on conceptually thinking and theorization, GTM may indeed enhance the ethnographic research in several other ways. First, much of the difficulty for the digital ethnographer lies in trying to manage piles of field notes, identifying their relevancy and the confluence of different segments of the studied world as specific constructs online. The systematic guidelines of grounded theory aided me in overcoming the problem of random data collection and moving back and forth between data assisted me in focusing the research process and identifying what kind of data to collect next. Given that the content generation took place in multifaceted contexts, and the multi-dimensional use of interaction in the community of mothers, there were times that I felt overwhelmed by my long-term

everyday immersion in the research site. So, there was always a risk of losing track of the main question of the study, and it may have been easier than one thought. With respect to this, data comparison analysis and the conceptual sensitivity of the GT provided a kind of systematic check into the sociological concepts of ethnography, whether they are really embedded in the participants' lived experiences and the world I study. In parallel, I especially sorted digital archival materials based on the topics which are relevant to the conceptual categories, and the processes emerged as they were linked together. Eventually, the analytic steps of the methodology provide an opportunity to make more accurate observations and structure the interview data in relation.

On the other hand, the conceptual sensibility is an important goal of the GTM research; however, "the emphasis on conceptual development risks obliterating the in-depth, first-hand knowledge ethnography provides" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2007, p. 507) and the process of rich material, "thick descriptions" of the studied world's lived experiences (Geertz, 1973) should not be tainted by the list of these concepts. Ellis's (1986) reflections on his ethnographic work of a community within the grounded theory framework echo a similar issue. He explains that the emphasis on the conceptual development leads him to force the details derived from ethnography into his grounded theory categories, even if they do not fit and raise the tensions with the emerged concepts. My own experience of analyzing the digital ethnographic data speaks to a similar point. Charmaz (2006) considers notes about setting observations are data that can be coded and accordingly, I decided to code my field notes through incident-by-incident coding, which applies better to observational data than line-by-line coding, in part because the field notes already entails the researcher's own words (see in Charmaz & Mitchell, 1999; 2001). However, I sensed that embedding the codes of observation in the data set of interviews produced tensions beyond my expectations between analytic insights of written observations and participants' world and spoken accounts. I did not feel it was appropriate to code them in the same way as the interviews; hence, the process posited a set of unrelated codes and did not provide close fit with data, which might

interrupt the conceptual density and durability. Rather than an attempt to find negative cases providing alternative explanations to these tensions, situations and themes that do not fit my analysis, which would mistake the theoretical sampling of the oncoming process, it should be noted that I revised the coding strategy for the mains study. Therefore, I decided to utilize ethnographic data derived from the site observations, which primarily continued to inform the interviews, but were not coded in the main study. I believe however, the observational data has an explanatory power which would generate excellent descriptions to contextualize the generalizations and contradictions that constitute to the analysis. Such an execution could serve to connect individual plights and practices with a larger social totality, which I believe would be more efficient in creating theoretical complexity.

Ultimately, due to the absence of predetermined categories by virtue of the grounded theory methodology, unstructured observation technique conducted in this study provided with me substantial flexibility regarding data collection and enabled me to detect the new connections to understand how this experience could be assigned to and enabled by the digital medium.

Another important point is that “in the field of digital ethnography, one of the most understudied areas is on the impact of digital technologies, offline” (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017, p. 7), which also is the concern of this study where the researcher studies not just the affordances and qualities of digitally-enabled community, but instead its impact on the strands of lived experience of women, including environments, relationships, activities and maternal identity in the offline space. Within the methodological framework of constructivist GT, the digital ethnography guided by feminist maternal standpoint theory shares the aspects of being in the everyday world habited by the participants and my collaborations with them that frames researcher and researched relationship in this study.

It appears that at the same time, doing research in the digitally constituted environment makes a difference to how we practice our ethnographic research.

Based upon the ethnographic methodology literature regarding the digital, (Haraway, 1991, 2013; Hakken, 1999; Hine, 2000; Turkle, 2005; Murthy, 2008; Postill, 2011; Lupton, 2015), different scholars may take different positions on the digital context we do our research, situate, use or practice it in different ways by relating it to various existing definitions in the literature. Concordantly, as the perspective that I take informs the very ways in which the digital ethnography was formulated and practiced in this study, it will be proper to take a step back and touch on this.

Digital ethnography, contributing to our understanding of digital media and technologies used in substantive social settings, alludes to the discussions around the ways of studying media in an ethnographic study. The discussion of digital in the field encompasses a range of perspectives including media-centrism (the idea of situating media at the center of the research) and a non-digital-centric approach what media scholars refer to as “non-media-centric media studies” (Couldry, 2004; Morley, 2009; Moores, 2012; Pink, et al., 2015) that tackles the issue with studying every day, material and the virtual. Such approaches view the centralization of digital / media in the analysis as problematic on the ground that little attention is paid to how media relates to wider social structures and relations. Pink (2015) asserts that “in order to understand how digital media is part of people’s everyday worlds, we also need to understand other aspects of their worlds and lives. In doing so we need to focus on those domains of activity in which digital media are used” (P. 28). In concordance with this view, potentialities of digital space to transform the experience of motherhood or as part of a social change can only be understood in relation to the socio-cultural norms of motherhood and social relationships of it experienced in the real-life context. I did not direct any questions to the participants of the study about how they use this digital space but instead tried to understand their practices related with using it. Hence, the respective way of studying media through the practice of digital ethnography in this study acknowledges the idea of looking beyond the digital to understand how the social relations of motherhood played out, yet it does not consider the ignorance of characteristics and affordances

particular to the digitally-enabled medium. It seems more accurate to argue that it is important to understand the particularities of the digital medium to be able to demonstrate their entanglements with the environments, constructions and relations of motherhood. For this very reason media is an important part of this study, since through its practices we are able to understand social change or transformation. In this research, while my interest as a researcher is distinctive characteristics of digital related to other domains of studied phenomenon; my approach to understanding the interplay of virtual space with physical means representing an understanding more than just the role of digital in the reality of these women which are larger than the digital realm itself.

Consequently, understanding derives mostly my presence in the world of study with research participants and the knowledge rests on “the authority of being there” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2007, p. 505) when the interactions, practices and events takes place. Along with the transparency of the methods and how I applied them, triangulation of the data sources is used to enhance the internal validity of the inquiry. While the digital ethnography remedies the criteria of credibility, including semi-structured in-depth interviews into the data collection method, which I believe, provided me with a more in-depth understanding and richer data.

4.2. Sequential In-Depth Interviewing

This qualitative study employs a combined method, including the one-to-one in-depth interviews, which complement the method of digital ethnography. I especially selected intensive interviewing as it permits a deeper exploration of a particular experience. Among the means in which data is read from the in-depth interviews, this study perceives the interview data in a way that Silverman (2013) refers to as “narrative approach” – an access to the stories and narratives of people in order to understand the studied world or the experience from their own perspectives and where the intention of the researcher is not to reproduce the views of research participants but to generate conceivable accounts of the studied world or experience in concert with them.

In-depth interviewing is well suited to the grounded theory studies conducting exploratory research for several reasons. First, grounded theory methods depend on a similar type of flexibility as in-depth interviews which allows a probe and prompts style of questioning and enables a dialogue with the respondents. This is especially important for the grounded theory framework. The researcher needs to follow her/his preconceptions about the setting and pursue emergent themes and issues in the interviews by regularly returning to the field to fill the conceptual gaps in the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Second, one of the major concerns of the constructivist approach is “to tap the participants own assumptions, implicit meanings and tacit rules” (p. 32). In terms of that, an in-depth interview enables a dialogue with respondents and provides an opportunity “to discuss the topic using the respondents’ own frame of reference, own language and own concepts” (Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2005, p. 162). In-depth interviews, therefore lead the researcher to explore the untapped avenues of the topic under investigation, which supports grounded theory methodology in its attempt to reveal the new in the existent.

Additionally, rather than using specialist terminology, grounded theory pays particular attention to elicit the terms from the lexicon of the participants and develop an understanding of their meaning. Intensive interviewing can be helpful in that the dialogue with the participants makes it possible to verify that the connotation of a term is the same to both parties who employ it. Within this context, it helps the researcher control his/her tendencies to employ the extant concepts that do not fit with the data.

Last, in-depth interviews, while providing a level of flexibility, at the same time enables the researcher to control the data collection and analysis, which is considered to be a critical aspect of the research process in the grounded theory. Within this framework, the initial interviews had a different focus than the interviews that occurred as the research proceeded because I began to gather specific data by narrowing down the topics toward the development of a theoretical framework. The method allows the researcher to elicit the example stories to ground

the respondents' narratives and "the property of control inherent in in-depth interviewing techniques fit grounded theory strategies for increasing the analytic incisiveness of the resultant analysis" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 29).

Intensive interviewing is designed to be face-to-face from the very beginning, which is more effective with complex experiences such as mothering, open-ended yet directed. Given that the interview setting and location during the research may influence the character and the content of interaction, it is important to clarify that as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact societies all over the world, like many other researchers, especially the ones who are closely working with communities, I faced with methodological challenges posed by the pandemic. As a researcher navigating the constraints of social distancing have entailed for my research design including contact, video-conferencing has become a viable option for face-to-face communication in real-time and for engaging in the qualitative research throughout data collection which could enable the progress at the onset. Although there are many alternative options of free video-conferencing, such as Skype, Face Time, Hangouts and Teams, taking into account and being aware of potential differences between myself as a researcher and participants in terms of cognitive adaptation to a particular software, in my research project I chose Zoom for online interviews because it was the most preferred and commonly used video-conference application among my research participants. I also used Zoom for all my interviews so far because of ease of technology and it facilitated voice/video recording during the interviews. Whilst the voice recording facility afforded my full attention to the research participants with a sustained eye contact, video recording made many details giving meaning to speech such as tone of voice, facial expression and gestures accessible for me.

Commonly in qualitative inquiry, researchers refer to the effectiveness of in-person interviews in gaining confidence, social access and establishing rapport (Henn, 2005) and video-conferencing interviews are mostly utilized as an alternative option in necessary cases. Unlike the more traditional ways of face-to-face

interviews, it is rarely considered as a primary research method. Even though there is no clear distinction made for the appropriateness of a particular medium, utilizing video-conferencing interviews adds an additional layer of considerations I needed to contend with as a qualitative researcher, such as lack of physical proximity and the degree of social presence required for the intended interaction to be able to establish a rapport with the participants. Therefore, my sustained attention was not limited to how the participants were influenced, but I tried to be aware about how I, as a researcher was influenced by the use of this technology. With respect to this, real-time, synchronous, video interviews were much like traditional interviews, except the separate locations of the researcher and the participants, the benefits of which, as far as I have experienced, outweigh the cited drawbacks.

Being a mom is a full-time endeavor, and the use of the method provided a flexibility to be able to arrange the interviews on their schedule, and I realized that more people become amenable to participate in the research. So, the logistical ease of arranging interviews and rescheduling them in case of cancellations were the added benefits. Most of my participants were at home during the interview; each of them took more than an hour. Participant's engagement in the research on their schedule and at their own location enabled a comfortable setting that affords a certain level of privacy and was encouraging for more open-communication.

On the other hand, in terms of the degree of social presence the medium can afford, I can tell that the real-time, synchronous video interviews compensated the lack of physical proximity with the capacity to transmit both the verbal and non-verbal (sensory and emotional) cues, lending to an intended interaction that necessitates the sustained attention to the feelings, reactions, facial expressions and idiosyncrasies of participants. My personal observation led me to note that being a member of the support community and my personal context of motherhood served to support communication with the mothers and provided a kind of propinquity effect. Establishing adequate propinquity supported me in adopting a non-hierarchical research style in which the participants potential perceptions of power structure between the researcher and themselves is cleared away. Video-

conferencing interviews took place as multiple interviews with each participant, including follow-ups after initials.

I observed that the questions asked in the pilot interviews were appropriate for the purpose of the study. I directed questions to the subjective experiences of becoming and being a mother and their conception about the support first, and later, attended to practices of the community and the individual's participation in them and views of them as to make a connection between the two worlds. I tried to frame sample interview questions “sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences and narrow enough to elicit and elaborate the participant's specific experience” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 29). I took list of sample questions with me into the interviews; however, I kept the number of questions asked in each session rather limited as I preferred to keep it conversational, and the probes and prompts style of questioning. Additionally, transcribed voice-recordings helped to reflect on the effectiveness of research questions and my skills of conducting the interviews.

As grounded theory encourages the use of both ethnographic and interviewing approaches, my period of observations prior to and in-between supported with me in returning to the interview participants with more focused questions. Therefore, for the follow-up interviews I framed the questions around the field notes and memo writings, and narrowed the range of the interview topics, including the clarifying questions towards the development of the conceptual categories and theoretical framework.

4.3. Sampling Through Critical Case Selection

This study employs a theoretical sampling method within the grounded theory framework in which the case is strategically selected. From the beginning, I opted for a critical case selection approach, “in which settings (or people) are chosen for investigation precisely because they offer the researcher the clearest insight into the topic being investigated” (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2005, p. 155). The strategic

case approach of the study aspires to capture nuances of gender network communalism through a particular type of social media and its effects within a specific cultural context of motherhood. Rather than obtaining a statistically representative sample or typicality, as a qualitative researcher, my concern lies with the selection of research site and participants relevant to the theoretical focus of the study.

Currently, various instances of online support networks within diverse contexts have been created by women for women in Turkey, enabling women to come together virtually, share their experiences and find answers to their questions. One of those with the high numbers of members is *Women's Club*, defining themselves *Atatürkist Modern Turkish Women* (established in 2016, 15,000 members). On the other hand, among those communities in the digital platforms, created within the contexts related to motherhood & child-rearing are *Nursing Mothers Club* with 4,382 members on Facebook, *I am Pregnant Mommy-Kids Club* (established in 2015, 46.700 members, providing information for expectant mothers who cannot attend maternity and infant academies due to their economic status.), *Mothers on Facebook* (with 10.000 members, established in 2017) *Sleepless Mothers Club* (on Twitter) and *Entrepreneur Mothers* on Facebook can be cited as other examples. With an intention to move away from the generalizations toward the studies with specific contexts, I decided to focus on one specific place in the virtual world, *Araştırın Anneler* (AA), –a Turkey-based Facebook user group–is selected as a critical case for this study and the reasons are detailed in the following.

Anneler is the capacious Turkey-based virtual social support platform for mothers on Facebook, has reached 15,722 members as of today. AA was founded in 2014 by two women who are mother themselves and recognized a social need to provide social support for women in one of the most important life experiences of motherhood.

The support offered by the online community is not confined to a particular audience such as single and new mothers or dedicated to a specific aspect of motherhood such as vaccination, pregnancy or breastfeeding. Instead, the age range between 25-44 and the diversity of the discussion topics suggest an attempt to embrace as many women of diverse positions with different maternal experiences and as many concerns of motherhood as possible. The primary aim of the community is to support women by pooling knowledge and experience. Founders defined the community as “the platform of all mothers and expectant mothers who wonder, read, question, follow, investigate, look closely at life”. There is no intention to provide the members with specialized formal information resembling the sponsored parenting sites; on the contrary, the primary aim is to create a feminine space in which women can provide emotional and informational support each other based on their own experiences of motherhood. It is a closed woman-only group, which means only the members can reach shared posts and the information of others. *Araştırın Anneler* community is neither open to advertisement for membership; nor allows the marketing applications of any outside product or services. All of the participants become members of this private community with the advice of another friend. In this sense, it is possible to say that the voices of market functioning are largely eliminated within this women-only space. AA is not a pseudo community so it is not possible to speak of the anonymization of online identities that may result in an identity deception. Members must supply their biography and the real images of themselves as displayed in their personal accounts of Facebook and be approved by the admins before being allowed to participate in group interaction. The discussion board attracts around 30 new posts per day. *Araştırın Anneler* is a specific example of a mother-to-mother support community and has a very low tolerance for aggressive, critical, discriminating and harsh comments. Administrators specify group rules clearly, and the relevant file is published on the platform and available for new members to be aware. I particularly selected the group for several reasons: first, more focused & research question relevant group, second, higher interactivity & reciprocity of the type required by the research question and third, capacity to make

more detailed & descriptively extensive data. Further, the community is typically constituted as private by public sphere, and this proper allows for the problematization of social issues relevant to the lives of mothers and reevaluation of meaning and practices of motherhood.

This study questions the digital spaces' ways of transforming the women's experience of social issues related to the current structure of today's motherhood. In defining the main concern of this study in this way, I sought for the virtual communities that not only provide virtual social support, but show a tendency to address the meaning and practices of motherhood that have problematically relevance in the way women live their lives and experience motherhood. Even though; the founders of AA do not perceive the platform as a political tool or a site for active resistance, they involve in particular practices to raise women's consciousness about the structural source of problems in relation to the way they experience motherhood. Accordingly, the founders' parallel establishment of a special group for fathers, called the *Researching Fathers* (Araştırın Babalar), can be taken as part of an effort to emphasize the necessity of equal involvement of men in parenting work.

In the light of the above characteristics, the setting selected for this study allows for tracing the mechanisms of patriarchal cultural context, at the same time, it consists of a middle- & upper-class profile of women who experience motherhood by being highly exposed to the pressures of today's modern motherhood. Even though access to these technologies is highly problematized in the context of empowerment and digital inequality in the gender studies (Gajjala, 2002), the selected case offers a productive realm for such an inquiry because the women having access to this virtual setting constitute an audience of a social structure with the potential in terms of an awareness needed to use digital media and technologies in a way that advantaged them. This means that I tried to select a case where I can observe and reach the participants who have had or are still having the experience under investigation and can be reflective about it. Therefore, the sampling is designed

with the focus on the conceptual/informational needs and the availability of access to the social process, which is the concern of the research.

Critical case selection provided with a sampling frame in which I selected in-depth interview participants from to study the variations in the meaning in different individual contexts according to the grounded theory sampling scheme that is changing dynamically with each phase of the research. Data collection, analysis and theory construction proceed simultaneously and cannot be separated; so, our approach to sampling changes accordingly as indicated by the data. With respect to this, two main phases of sampling are defined as initial and theoretical sampling in the grounded theory. The initial type of sampling method, including convenience and purposeful sampling, is used at the beginning of the study to determine the scope, components, and dimensions, as well as the course of the overall process (Morse, 2010).

On the other hand, theoretical sampling, considered one of the most important attributes of the methodology, is driven primarily by the requirements of the theoretical saturation of categories and constant data comparison. Theoretical sampling is “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop a theory as it emerges” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45).

There were 12 participants in the research. I conducted the pilot study with 3 participants and further 10 participants, including the one and only father in the group, who took part in the main study. I undertook two types of sampling methods including convenience in the pilot study and the purposive sampling in the initial phase of the main study as indicated by the methodology of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). For the oncoming process of the main study towards the generation of the emerged theory, theoretical sampling, considered one of the most important attributes of the methodology, is driven primarily by the requirements of

the theoretical saturation of categories of live examples encompassed by the social process (interaction of the real-life experience of motherhood with the experience of virtual support) under investigation within the milieu. Grounded theory logic presupposes that the categories are constructed through comparative method of data analysis and cannot be assumed in advance (Charmaz, 2006), so the theoretical sampling, that distinguishes grounded theory from other approaches, is significantly more than coding and about obtaining data for explicating conceptual categories and theoretical refinement in the pursuit of theoretical saturation.

In the pilot study, I undertook a non-probability sampling method and I conducted one-on-one semi-structured in-depth online interviews with three participants whom I designated within the initial sampling phase with the focus on the criteria of accessibility and convenience rather than the representativeness, which is a totally different logic from the purposive and theoretical sampling of oncoming process in the research.

I had distant but existent relationships with the three participants of the pilot study. The samples do not involve the close friends of my or any member of the family, even though its well accepted for the convenience sampling (Phua, 2004; Morse, 2010). Convenience sampling participants are sought based on their representation of the particular setting according to the following criteria:

- Women who are mothers
- Who live in Turkey
- Who choose to participate in the virtual community *Araştırın Anneler* to elicit social support about motherhood and maintain their membership.

Participants of the pilot study consisted of one high school graduate working mother having one child and two graduate stay at home mothers each having two children between the ages 3 and 7.

Convenience sampling provided with me a point of departure to address the beginning research questions within the phase of the pilot study, allowing me to

explore the boundaries and scope of the phenomenon under investigation. Despite the fact that I adopted critical case selection approach from the beginning, I still needed to identify the most appropriate participants within the group of *Araştırın Anneler* for my research.

In opposition to the current literature, which mostly considers a specific group of new mothers whose eldest child is not older than two years (Davis, K. E., 2015), as cohort; beyond my researcher identity, myself as a mother, I may contend that motherhood is as constantly evolving and dynamic as so not to be confined by the age of the children or any form of motherhood in such a study focusing on the experience of mothers of social support. For this very reason, in the pilot study I was flexible with the sampling criteria of participants which are sought based on their membership of *Araştırın Anneler* and my ability to access these participants through social media to ask for their participation in the study in advance of putting recruitment message in use, and the age of mother or their children did not set the criterion for this study.

It is crucial to note that I had an access to relevant materials for the study, leading me to sampling people, but not the subjective perspectives and experiences of them. In other words, I started with a provisional definition of what the term “virtual support” subsumes, but I needed to find out what actually “support” means to those women, who see themselves as part of this online support community of mothers. So, there were two important reasons of choosing this form of initial sampling prior to the theoretical. First, I should have examined my preconceptions based on my field observations and preliminary literature review on “virtual support” and explore the primary categories that would guide me to contact with certain people but at the same time, prevent the topic to circumscribe me in addressing the potential issues and whom I can address with. Secondly, related to the former, is that I was reluctant to post recruitment messages on the platform from the very beginning because I had not yet defined on which sampling criteria, I would evaluate the interested, potential participants in such a way as to improve the

precision, scope and analytic power of the analysis. With respect to this, accessing a small number of participants in the pilot study was an important consideration for me at that point, and engaging in data collection from a small part of participants in-depth in the initial sampling phase provided with me preliminary categories which are suggestive in terms of prompting me to predict the source of data and where I can find them, if not yet definitive.

Consequentially, the pilot study interviews provided rich data which I decided to include in the data set of the main study and was valuable not only for allowing me to explore things I had seen during the period of the site observation but also let me to recognize the point of tensions raised between the data derived my field notes and the interview data so I conducted follow-up interviews with each of the participants concurrently with initial coding and analysis.

Once I identified general trajectory, I return back to the site for the main study to publish the recruitment message on the platform of *Araştıran Anneler* with the approval of the gate keepers. Recruitment message called for every member of the group and designed as to make explicit my dual identity as a member and a researcher. Among the 30 women who were interested in participating in the study, some of them responded directly to the post, while some other reached out directly to me via direct messaging and others preferred to contact directly with the admins of the group. After the pilot study, I began using purposeful sampling for the initial phase of the main study. During the pilot study interviews I recognized that the people who have higher engagement with the community either in the form of close follow-up or active participation, have a sound grasp of the experience under investigation, are more willing to share information and are able to speak articulately about the phenomenon. Therefore, even if the criteria I used for the convenience sampling remained unchanged, in the purposive sampling phase, I evaluated the participation requests based on the criteria of membership duration. For the initial stage of the main study, I included mothers with membership over a year and I also considered their level of engagement with the community and the

topic posts they shared. I began initial interviews of the main study with 4 participants, while at same time I was conducting follow-up interviews with 3 participants from the pilot study.

For the main study, but still in the initial sampling phase, I opted to include a single mother whose spouse committed suicide when her baby was six months old. Having access to a mother with an experience of motherhood under extraordinary conditions made me realize that during my first round of interviews, I only interviewed married women who had an experience of motherhood within a nuclear family setting as to conform the socio-cultural norms of motherhood and whose profiles overlapped roughly. On the other hand, during my analysis of this interview, “vulnerability” emerged as an important theme and as a part of an important process absent from the statements of earlier participants. Reflecting on how my own story of this online support community evolved as a member who was in corrosive progress of becoming a single mother, I suddenly recognized the variation in the experience and perception of virtual support of ordinary versus unordinary contexts in which motherhood is experienced. The community’s potential to be more than an information exchange platform and the point where women see themselves as part of the group manifests itself in subjective contexts.

Furthermore, whether or how do women reflect their online experience on their daily survival, the relationship they establish with the virtual space and so the interaction between the physical and virtual is comprised of a complex of an individual’s experience of motherhood, personal matters, worldviews and life stories.

My analysis revealed that I needed to follow what I identified in the data. Different from the other kinds of purposeful sampling, theoretical sampling means that “researchers deliberately seek participants who have had particular responses to experiences, or in whom particular concepts appear significant” (Morse, 2010, p. 240). In that sense the first interview of the main study was a critical landmark for the theoretical sampling in terms of guiding me to decide “what data to collect next

and where to find them” (Glaser & Strauss, 2006, p.45). In this way as does coding, the data collection becomes more focused.

In parallel, I revised the sampling strategy as to seek out potential participants who can illuminate this process to be able to define more specific forms of variation, for whom it has relevance in the field setting, when and how the category emerges. With respect to this, to ensure that the final data contains a range of member’s views and experiences, I decided to involve new mothers, divorced/single mothers, a mother whose children’s age is above the average of the group from the list of the participants stating their interest of participation in the study through the recruitment message. On the other hand, locating and interviewing with members who had undergone some form of unordinary situations would have presented few difficulties, so I requested the help of the group founders as they have a grasp of real-life stories of the many members of the community. For the theoretical sampling, the second phase of the sampling in grounded theory, I reached and conducted interviews with 4 mothers and a father (with a little children) who lost his wife from cancer and is the only male member accepted to the group.

The primary use of the theoretical sampling in this study was to find out participants based on my analysis to be able to develop the conceptual categories grounded in the data, hence contributing to the emerging theory. “Theoretical sampling can entail studying documents, conducting observations, or participation in new social worlds as well as interviewing or reinterviewing with a focus on your theoretical categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 107). Thus, my method of conducting theoretical sampling includes the selection of new participants and reinterviewing with earlier respondents with targeted questions which help me to fill-out properties of the categories, clarify linkage between them, and identify variation and commonalities in the process.

One of the challenges grounded theory posits is the theoretical saturation, which entails the simultaneous and perpetual data collection and analysis until no new categories emerged, accordingly this study did not depart with an aim of a

predetermined number of participants which became clearer as the interviews and the analysis took place and when the categories reached the level of saturation. For this study, theoretical saturation achieved with 12 participants and a total of 23 interviews (I conducted one single interview with the father and the admins of the community) and I may contend that combined method of data collection including participant observation had also impact on the number of participants required for this study to achieve theoretical saturation.

The grounded theory refers to the emergence of categories and their properties from data through social research, by phasing the previous theoretical knowledge out to spark new questions and generate fresh ideas. The methodology puts emphasis on the category building through theoretical sensitivity, which requires the researcher to reflect upon the data with theoretical expressions. The concept of “emergence” or “grounded” is translated into tangible tools including constant comparison of data and coding as well as the theoretical sampling which illuminates the properties of categories and the relationships through further comparison.

Table 4.1: Data Collection Activities by Participant

Participant	Pilot or Main study?	Mode	Profile	Number of Interview	Date of Interviews
Ezgi	Pilot Study	Zoom-video conferencing	42 years old working mom Married High school graduate 1 Child with the age of 7 Living in Istanbul	2	First Int:31.05.2020 Second Int.: 15.09.2020
Zehra	Pilot Study	Zoom-video conferencing	42 years old Stay at home Married 2 Children with 7- and 3-years old girls MBA Degree Living in Istanbul	2	First Int: 1.06.2020 Second Int: 20.09.2020

İrem	Pilot Study	Zoom-video conferencing	Married, two boys, 3 and 8 years old, University grad. 39 years old, stay at home mother, Living in Istanbul	2	First Int: 02.06.2020 Second Int: 12.08.2020
Selin	Main Study	Zoom-video conferencing	37 Years old Working mom Married Univ. Grad 1 Child with the age of 4 Living in Istanbul	1	First Int: 29.09.2020
Tülin	Main Study	Zoom-video conferencing	35 Years old Working Mom, Married Master Degree One 4 years old child Living in Istanbul	2	First Int: 1.10.2020 Second Int: 2.01.2021
Berna	Main Study	Zoom-video conferencing	31 years old, Working M. Married Univ. Grad New Mother with 7 months baby girl Living in Istanbul	2	First Int: 15.10.2020 Second Int: 3.12.2020

Tülay	Main Study	Zoom-video conferencing	37 Years old Stay at home MBA degree *Single mother with 7 years old boy Living in Istanbul	2	First Int: 23.10.2020 Second Int: 11.12.2020
Yaren	Main Study	Zoom-video conferencing	32 Years Old Stay at home Ph.D. Degree New mother with 11 month baby girl Living in Istanbul	2	First Int: 3.11.2020 Second Int: 9.12.2020
Beyza	Main Study	Zoom-Video Conferencing	43 years old, married, Mother of a handicapped twin of 12 years old Univ. graduate Living in Istanbul	2	First Int: 19.12.2020 Second Int: 21.02.2021

Berrin	Main Study	Zoom-video conferencing	38-Year-old, working, single mother with 4 - years-old girl. Univ graduate. Living in Istanbul	2	First Int: 26.12.2020 Second Int: 21.02.2021
İzim	Main Study	Zoom-video conferencing	42-Year-old, working Single mother with 2 years old girl Master Degree. Living in Istanbul	2	First Int: 20.12.2020 Second Int: 27.02.2021
Ali	Main Study +1	Zoom-video conferencing	41-Year-old Single father of 5-year-old boy Only men in the group Univ. Degree Living in Istanbul	1	6.11.2020
Gatekeepers Interview	Main Study +1	Zoom-video conferencing	Two Founders of AA Mothers of 2 children each, Living in Istanbul	1	3.10.2020

4.4. Data Analysis Methods

The guideline of data analysis within the grounded theory framework is underpinned by the “constant comparison methods” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which the initial codes are compared with initial data, informing the directions of further data collection and toward the theoretical saturation achieved, categories compared with other categories and concepts to be able to set the relationship between them until no new categories emerged. The analyzing process is finalized with theorizing (Charmaz, 2006). Basically, the analytic procedure of theory construction consists of six iterative phases including initial and focused coding, memo-writing, theoretical sampling, saturating theoretical concepts and theoretical sorting (Charmaz & Henwood, 2017).

The first analytic stage of grounded theory in moving toward interpretative rendering is coding which is defined by Corbin and Strauss (2015, p.57) as “denoting concepts to stand for meaning” and Charmaz states that ‘through coding, we raise analytic questions about our data from the very beginning of data

collection' (2014, p. 5). These definitions exhibit the centrality and inseparability of coding from the data analysis process of grounded theory.

Taking into account that the data collection method and what qualitative researcher recorded, define what to code and entirely frame the coding so I prefer transcribing entire interviews with the participants and coding full interview transcriptions. Grounded theory coding consists of two main phases as initial and focused coding: Depending on the amount of data to be collected and the researcher's choice, initial coding involves one of the varieties naming as line-by-line, word-by-word or incident-by incident-coding. During the initial coding, the goal is to define what is happening in data, what this data is a study of (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and what does it suggest and whose point of view (Charmaz, 2006). On the other hand, focused coding is a selective phase where the theoretical integration begins with use of the salient codes and categories and proceed through analytic steps.

GTM authors introduces multiple coding strategies (axial coding, theoretical coding, mapping and so on) including the advantages and drawbacks of each, which are mostly presented in the form of recommendations rather than rules. The approach to coding and data analysis adopted in this study follows Charmaz's process of coding in the constructivist GTM. Accordingly, I selected line-by-line coding which means moving through naming each line of my written full transcriptions because the in-depth interviews are consisted of detailed data about the processes, stories of participants that may take on vivid meanings and tacit assumptions as well as explicit statements. Even though it seemed an arbitrary exercise in the beginning because not every sentence appeared to be significant, coding each line of data not only provided with me a guidance of what kind of data to collect next for the further inquiry and analysis in the early stage of the study but also helped me to not to omit anything seems insignificant at the first sight but might be considered important in the further.

Different from the quantitative logic applying predefined codes or concepts to data, grounded theory coding emphasizes the importance of approaching the data with openness to all possible theoretical directions and creating codes intended by the meanings we define within the data.

To be able to stay close to the data, both Bryant (2017) and Charmaz (2006) suggest coding with gerunds or in other words coding data as action when possible, which underpinned my approach to initial coding.

All in all, our ways of knowing is the interpretation of the real and when our lives blend with worlds we visit and texts we study, as a researcher we always needed to keep in mind the existence of constructing an imaginative interpretation of these worlds according to the missions embraced by the researcher. Although what it means to be a mother is intertwined with the patriarchal constructs, ideas and practices of being a mother are defined within a specific context of time and social environment. In that sense, I come from a generation of mothers similar to that of the research participants and we are the member of the same collectivity. While I was listening to their stories with a hope to grasp their meanings, I realized that I was unintentionally comparing my own experiences of motherhood and perception of the group with theirs. Because of risk of imputing my motives and unresolved personal issues to the respondents and the data, which might prevent me from remaining open to other analytic possibilities, I attempted to code with words demonstrating actions rather than topics to the degree possible. Coding for actions helped me create codes that best fit with the data and control the tendency to adopt any extant theory, including the concepts of the theoretical perspective of this study before the analytical work is completely finalized.

The most basic procedure providing a foundation for category building and allowing the theory to emerge is the constant comparative method of data analysis which is at the core of grounded theory coding. Constant comparison analysis, which is iterative rather than linear, requires the researcher to actively act upon the data and move between the levels of coding to identify the gaps.

In that sense, the codes are provisional and comparative that needs the researcher to go back to the data and forth to the analysis to improve the fit until he/she learns how to conceptualize them (Charmaz, 2006).

In line with the emphasis of grounded theory on comparative method, by the whole analysis process I moved not only between the statements within the same interview, but also compared the data in the initial and follow-up interviews of the same individual. I also compared the codes and categories across the interviews of different individuals. Through coding the interviews and comparing them with each other, I revealed some gaps in the data which is a part of the analytic process in this methodology. There were times when I realized that some of the codes and my ideas about them represented another process or action different from the views of my participants. Therefore, I returned to the field at certain points and conducted observation and asked new questions to the respondents to check my ideas that did not mirror the data but might rest on some covert meanings unexplored yet. Additionally, I integrated *in vivo* codes which “serve as symbolic markers of participants’ speech and meanings” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55) to my analytic treatment of the data. One of the terms that I have heard from several participants during the interviews and created as an *in vivo* code was “like you, like me”. I discovered that use of the term depicted a particular set of characteristics that fit women who are the members of the community and captures the perspectives of mother on the community. “Like you, like me” was an act of self-identification through the community they were member of and meant at the same that they saw me as one of them. It meant educated, open-minded women having similar issues, experiences and concerns of today’s modern motherhood. This was useful in capturing the characteristic of community setting which plays an important role in the feeling of being part of this community and how women experience this virtual space.

The further difficulty I encountered during initial coding was related to compiling the codes. Each of the transcripts was for an interview of almost more than an hour duration. Each of the first few codings resulted in more than 100 comments with

multiple codes embedded in them, so it become apparent that such a coding in a Microsoft Word file would not allow me to generate a standardized list of codes, and made it difficult to see which context of the data each code belongs to. As a result, rather than hand sorting, I decided to employ computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) “Nvivo” in the process of GT analysis.

What is so crucial to understand here is that referring to the term “coding” as just naming a data segment, is deceptively simple for GT coding, which occurs in conjunction with the analysis through the inseparable components of the analysis such as memo writing and theoretical sampling. We define what we see in the data at a conceptual level through coding and it is “the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Briefly speaking to my experience with Nvivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software can aid the researcher in variety of ways, but it is still matter to use it in a way not to threaten the “groundedness”, which is the main promise of GT. This view implies that the software was a tool aiding me in compiling and sorting the codes during the analysis in this study where the thinking and analysis must still be done by the researcher. On the other hand, the software supported me to organize and manage the data on several counts. First, the memo function allowing the memo writing digitally, enabled me to link memos I wrote directly to the data segments, and they could be coded if needed. This is especially important as it enables the constant access to codes, memos and the statements they are closely related throughout the process. It also supports comparative method as it enables the comparison of statements related to specific issues or codes across diverse participants with different motherhood contexts. Finally, I developed concept maps at various points during the analysis which supported my brainstorming on how the emergent concepts, categories and individual contexts relate to each other. In terms of that Figure 4.1 illustrates examples of conceptual maps in which I locate the emerged concepts including the directions to be able to understand the nature of the relationship between them.

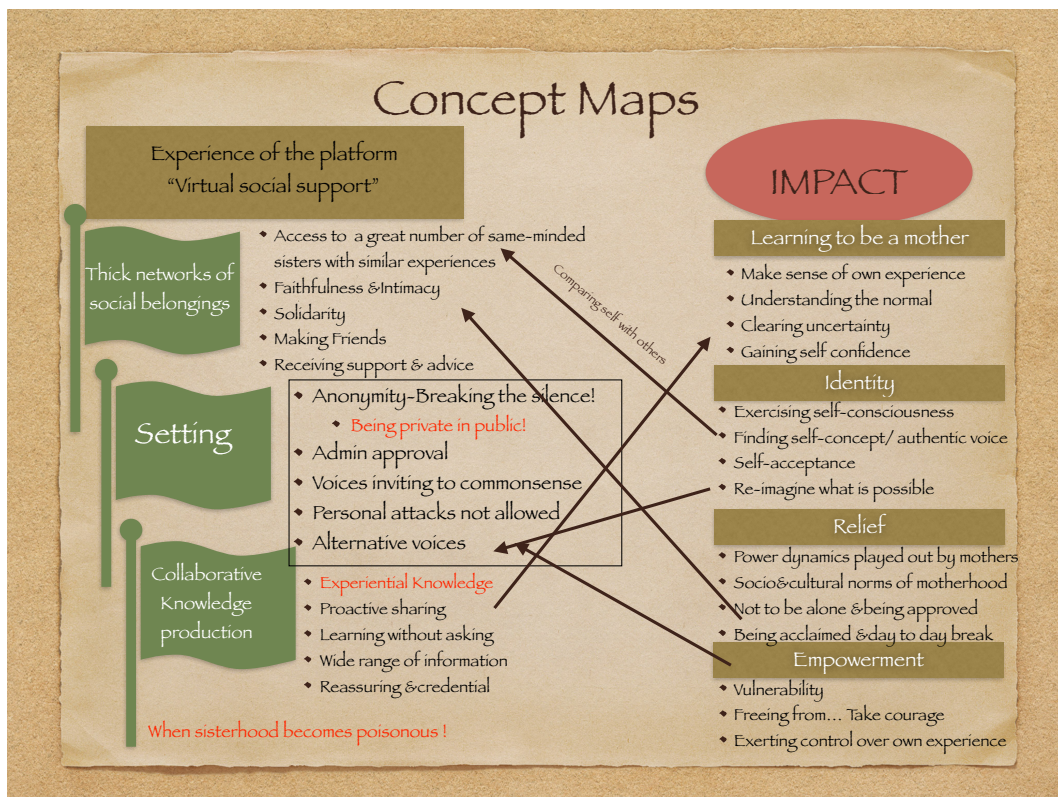
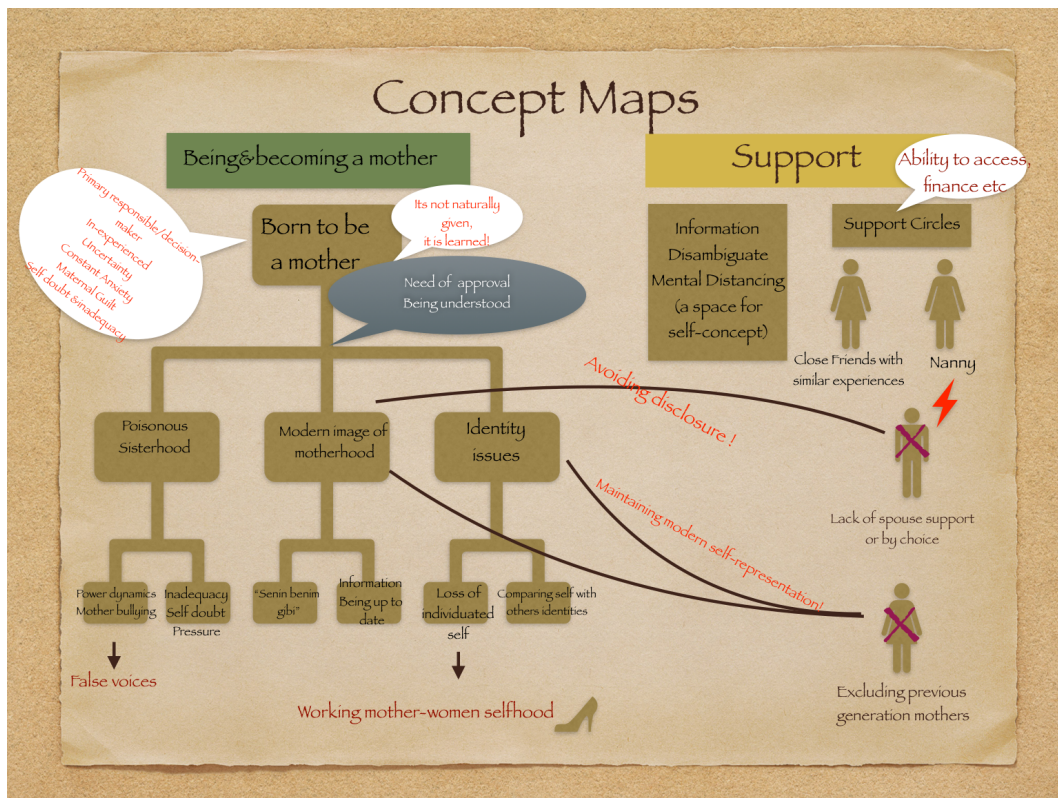


Figure 4.1: Examples of conceptual maps created during the analysis.

The constant comparison process continued through open/initial coding where the conceptual codes emerged at substantive levels to focused/selective coding that “requires the decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Therefore, in the selective coding stage, I selected to use the most frequent and/or significant initial codes to sort out their sufficiency through larger amounts of data. Through focused coding, as I moved across and within my field notes and the interviews, and continued to compare them, some of my open codes were collapsed into the newer conceptual codes, resulted in a reduced list of 58 initial codes. When the focused coding became finalized, I sorted the codes into four meta groups with the subcategories embedded in them.

- Being and Becoming a Mother (How do women experience motherhood, what does motherhood mean to them)
- Social Support (What do women understand from support, what are the circles of support and ability to access support)
- Experience of the Virtual Social Support Platform (Characteristics of the field setting in shaping the virtual support experience of mothers)
- Point of interactions between the experience of the platform and everyday mothering-impact.

On the other hand, coding of data occurs in tandem with the practice of memo writing which is a crucial method in GT because it prompts the researcher to space out coding and examine her/his conceptual ideas about the codes early in the research process. Concordantly, I also began memoing initially at the substantive coding level and kept writing memos in conjunction with the analysis and coding toward a level of conceptual abstraction.

Memos are analytic notes created by the researcher and are considered as for personal use so the way the memos produced is not mechanical, rather informal and

spontaneous (Charmaz, 2006) In addition to writing reflective memos about the data collection after each interview, I also created memos in various forms such as short analytic notes about the connections I made between emerging categories, the ones I needed to check the predicted relationships in data or through further interviews.

Early memos writing following each interview, opened up a space for me to develop new ideas and make new connections between data and codes, leading me to articulate some conjectures about my comparisons. So, I conducted follow-up interviews with mothers to pursue the questions that were raised during my act of writing, checked my conjectures and collected further data to fill out some of the earlier categories. For example, the short memo I wrote during my analysis, which was related to with the following quotation, helped me to spark new ideas and remain open to different possibilities that I checked out in the field setting later on.

BOX.4.2 A Sample of Short Memo from January 1th, 2020

Quotation:

Ezgi: My own mother or the mother in-law are not particularly the people, to whom I primarily turn for advice, information or ideas of child-rearing. Because their information is not up to date and they are not suitable for the contemporary motherhood.

Researcher: What do you mean by contemporary motherhood?

Ezgi: That is to say, as a result, I did not enter into a psychology as our mothers with three children who only do house work and babysitting at home. As a working woman, I think I managed to balance everything in my life.

*Memo: * She does not consider previous generation as qualified as to be a primary support circle because they do not have up-to-date knowledge on child care.*

**While rereading this and comparing it with other participant statements of previous generation support, it occurred to me that “excluding grandmas” might be related to other concerns of the women. Could it be a function of a control over maintaining a modern self-representation for them? Or maybe there is a perception that the previous generation are the representatives of patriarchal culture who maintains its associated norms of motherhood. Is it important to be in this community because it allows us to be together with similar others? I am not coding as it is not said clearly but taking not as a possibility.*

Additionally, since the grounded theory is carried out in the form of analyzing after each interview, there may be longer than ideal time between two analyzes of the same participant, so there and then memo-writings not only helped me to flag potential relationships between categories but also were evocative of what I had in my mind when I created these codes and what they mean.

Memo writing during the focused coding provides another conceptual step where we begin to treat some of the focused codes as categories by examining what category each code refers to and the relationships between them. This means that we have arrived at some preliminary categories to develop through theoretical sampling which is “to gather more data that focus on the category and its properties” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96) until the categories are saturated enough to sort and integrate them to the emerging theory. Coupled with memo-writing and coding, theoretical sampling is crucial to be able to increase the accuracy of categories, define the relevant properties in detail and explicate the analytic links between them (Charmaz, 2003). In addition, I especially used theoretical sampling to understand the ambiguities and tensions in different contexts.

The final stage, delimiting the theory, involves the interrelated process of theoretical sorting and integration of categories and memos to formulate the theory for writing. This final process of constructing a substantive theory requires the researcher to reduce the number of categories by deciding which categories to raise

to the conceptual level, meanwhile sorting memos as to fit the logic of them. “We choose to raise certain categories to concepts because of their theoretical reach, incisiveness, generic power, and relation to other categories” (Charmaz 2006, p. 139). The analysis process finalized with the identification of the relationship among individual elaborated concepts as hypotheses through “the use of appropriate theoretical codes to achieve an integrated theoretical framework for the overall grounded theory” (Holton, 2007, p. 283)

What we find in the empirical world shapes how we construct the content and experience the theorizing. There is a considerable amount of grounded theory studies in the literature focusing on one single category or major concept for theorizing; however, I had to wrestle with the integration of several concepts. While constructing my analysis of the data I used diagramming in the form of conceptual maps which is considered as an essential part of the grounded theory methods by leading grounded theorists (Clarke, 2003; Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2017) to overcome the challenge of integrating relevant categories. I developed conceptual maps where I located categories and subcategories, and as I make sense of the experiences they represent; I demonstrated the links between them. The method of mapping drove my interrogation of the data and provided with me a kind of visual representation of the emerged theory.

This study considering “motherhood” as the major event of the analysis concentrates on constructing a content of theorizing that defines and conceptualizes the relationship between this major event and the experience of virtual social support. This means that the theorizing practice involves the integration of the elaborated concepts deriving from each of two major phases into an interpretative frame offering an abstract understanding of the connection between the empirical world (virtual space) and the larger social structure of motherhood in a way to address the transformation. For the very reason, the most basic challenge for this study was to theorize this connection through a single basic process that merge everything. The analysis revealed that women experience several processes ranging from learning to be a mother to exercising self-consciousness through the

interactions taking place in the empirical world under investigation that affect women's real-sense of empowerment in the context of motherhood. Hence, to be able to mention any transformation in the experience of motherhood, the logic of this study's substantive theory captures how the sub-processes build on each other in a way to account for what constitutes empowerment within the specific cultural context.

From the onset of the study, it was compelling for me to clarify what stands for theory or what it should look like in practice within the grounded theory framework, which I believe arises from the many variants in the literature criticizing each other about what theory means. Even though there is not a set of instructions or a mechanical process of it, Charmaz (2006) provides a guidance on the constructivist approach to theorizing in the research, which enlightened my view of theorizing in this study. A grounded theory inquiry mostly results in an explanatory framework – a substantive theory addressing a delimited problem in a specific substantive area; however, when the analysis can be elevated to a more abstract levels with an explanatory power that cut across multiple fields raises the generality and results in a formal theory. The constructivist approach of theorizing in grounded theory reveals that “theories serve different purposes and differ in their inclusiveness, precision, level, scope, generality, and applicability” (p. 149). Constructivist GTM considers theorizing as a practice or an activity. In this study, my practice of theorizing aimed at generation of a substantive theory that makes contribution to gender, media and motherhood literature and provides new conceptual resources that could be applicable beyond the context of maternal subjects for the future studies focusing on the complex phenomenon of virtual social support.

Constructivist GT takes a reflexive stance toward all over the research process including theorizing. In this view, researcher is part of the constructed theory because her/his values, interests and varied experiences shapes the construction of theorizing content, but not the method proving a guidance to proceed. What is so

crucial to understand here is that the resulted theory reflects how the researcher acted on them.

4.5. Reflexivity: The mother, the researcher.

Leaning on pragmatism, constructivist approach to grounded theory acknowledges reflexivity to be an indispensable part of doing research within the collaborative construction of social realities by the research participants and the researcher (Charmaz, 20017). Accordingly, “any analysis is contextually situated in time, place, culture, and situation” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 131). This view, congenial with the co-constructive sensibilities of feminist theory, underlines an understanding of importance of researcher’s own values, experiences, interests and interactions with research participants that acts to influence all stages of the research process as to include what we define as data, how we work with them. Thus, reflexivity means “taking a critical look inward—a reflection on one’s own lived reality and experiences, a self-reflection or journey.” (Hesse-Biber, 2007). The positionality of the researcher is not limited to that, but act of reflection is more stressed as part of writing up and how grounded theories evolved within this framework (Mruck & Mey, 2019). Therefore, self-reflexivity can be interpreted in many different ways including the forms of “full explanation of how analytic and practical issues were handled” and “reflections on the researcher’s own emotions, worries, feelings” (Olesen, Bryant & Charmaz, 2010, p. 423).

In the light of the aforementioned arguments, I preferred to integrate my reflexive observations, and the why and how particular decisions are made into my documentation in a way to contextualize them with the particular stages of the research process rather than considering my self-reflection as a separate section. Admittedly, being highly self-conscious about the ways of narrative practices in the research, as well as incorporating the voices of the participants without distorting their experiences, is not an easy task. However, the tools generated by GT methodology, including memo writing, action coding and comparative methods,

are the acts that became the constitutive of my practice of reflexivity to control my own influence on the research process in this study.

First of all, this study exists within a specific disciplinary area shaping the researcher's aspirations. Scholarly tradition underpins the researcher's stance on the research subject, defines which aspect of the phenomenon she considers so the way she addresses the phenomenon under investigation. In terms of that, from the very beginning of the research process I limited my engagement with the existing literature in the field of the study, which is referred to as "preliminary literature review" in GTM, to avoid forcing my pre-conceived ideas, predominant assumptions and pre-conceived theoretical terms directly upon the data. Rather than a complete abstinence of the related literature, the aim is to sharpen the theoretical sensitivity and stimulate an understanding of the experienced world through the lens of participants. I returned back to the literature and theoretical framework in relation to my grounded theory after the analysis was finalized to make a link with extant theoretical concepts, position my theoretical categories in relation and support my analytical arguments.

On the other hand, I utilized memo-writing for a variety of purposes at different stages of the research. Besides the analytical memos including my ideas about the codes and their relationship, I wrote self-reflexive memos from the beginning and during the field work. Especially the memos I wrote after the in-depth interviews with a focus on my gained learnings from my own experience of conducting the data collection allowed me to critically analyze the interview questions, the interactions with interviewees and provide a foundation for some decisions I made in regard to research approach and execution.

For the first few interviews I noted that the questions asked were appropriate for the purpose of the study, however, when I sat alone transcribing voice records, I was more able to hear and feel the conversation. I realized, at sometimes, the participants were so much preoccupied with the thoughts of answering to what was asked rather than what they wanted to tell so I thought that the data derived from

the initial interviews were not as in-depth as I would have liked in terms of the comprehensiveness of the individual stories and events. As there were no major changes to the interview questions or the way the interviews were conducted, I decided not get beyond an initial set of questions in one session, reframe the questions as much as to be open-ended and sufficiently general to cover a range of stories, incidents, which enabled me to proceed with a few prompting questions to keep the story flow and foster their reflections, thoughts and feelings.

In terms of the role and experience of motherhood, one of the main categories with the label of “being and becoming a mother” emerged early in the study as to validate the arguments of the feminist motherhood literature involving the concepts of intensive motherhood, exclusive female mothering accompanied by the notions such as maternal guilt, constant anxiety or role strain with many others, frustrating women’s achievement of autonomous identity. Maybe it is because we are as women exceedingly embrace the role of primary care giver set out for us, or it is perhaps the focus of the study is motherhood, one of the persistent challenges in the interviews that I hardly overcame has been the difficulty to open their actions, statements and feelings to their own self or other possibilities outside of motherhood or mothering practices.

Additionally, both as a mother and as one of those women in the community, I am an insider to both the worlds that I study of and a part of the experience that I analyzed. Adopting non-hierarchical research style, this study was conducted within co-constructive interaction with participants rather than othering them. My positionality as a researcher, belonging to the similar culture and shared experiences enabled me to establish the intended rapport with participants and my complete involvement in the respective field supported me to realize and act on the limitations of the categories in the analysis. However, “the more researchers and participants belong to similar cultures, the more interviewers may presuppose concepts and values as shared” (Mruck & Mey, 2019, p. 478), and therefore there is a risk of some concepts or ideas being obscured or disappeared. Accordingly, the theoretical

sampling strategy is framed to be sensitive to difference and variation in this study to ensure that the final data contains the range of member's views and experiences. Studying various cases is crucial for the researcher to become aware of and challenge her/his preconceptions about the topic (Charmaz, 2006).

On the other hand, my own biography and context in which my motherhood experience resides are important for the research process and worth for cautious self-reflexive analysis. Especially during the theoretical sampling stage, one of the biggest challenges I encountered was the emotional burden created by my interviews with the members of the community who experience motherhood in the specific contexts of loss of spouse, or serious illnesses of child. Sometimes I felt difficulty to deal with the shared information concerning their negative life experiences and traumas. I had entered an empathic process that pushed me on an introspection and made question my own experience of motherhood and femininity. This process was so difficult for me that I avoided making follow-up interviews for a while.

At the time of analyzing data, memos dealing with my emotional responses represented a tool to become aware of my positioning and feelings, distance my own experience from the voices of the participants whose presentations are at the heart of the matter. Reflecting on my earlier point that I used coding for action to avoid the risk of imputing my motives to the respondents. Subsequently, comparative method making the researcher move back to the field to check out the emergent ideas and hypotheses in the experience, also encouraged the reflexive practices during the research.

Eventually, the reflexive practices taken place in this study also concerns the question of my "stimulus value" (Mruck & Mey, 2019) as a researcher for those women within this co-constructive interaction and for the field I study. Inclusion of participatory features in the study opened up a space for the discussion of the issues of being a mother, how they were related to the participants' lives, why such issues

existed and how they could be improved through a development of new point of view and assessed the needs of digital media enabled environments including the virtual support community at hand to address those issues. Even if individuals may not aspire to state the oppressive results of those concerns that a researcher may define or resist, those were the points of interaction where the constructivist approach's potential to support research subjects to understand their situation and encourage collective responsibility manifested itself. "The cycle of shared reflection and practice" between the researcher and the participants in a cooperative inquiry (Mruck, 2019, p. 482; see in Heron, 1996) becomes more visible over time. Relatedly, I experienced that some of my participants began to observe the community posts more closely and shared with me the ones that they found important and related to the issues we talked during the interviews through messaging, in case I might have overlooked. Furthermore, after the interviews some of my other interview participants deliberately chose to share some of their personal topics by their name, which would normally be shared with the anonymous mother question facility, just to encourage the voices hijacked by the socio-cultural constructions. Therefore, in what way the position of observed and observer changed over time and to become aware of its influence on the type of information I got was part of the reflexive practices of this study.

As a consequence, on the occasion of my dual identity, I had been joining in the daily activities and life of mothers who are being studied in the online environment. At this point, beyond being a member, being accepted as a researcher among the community under investigation and gaining trust/confidence came to the fore to be able to gain social access to the intended processes. From this point of view, a rapport that I believe established with participants was an essential requirement to avert the issue that is referred to as reactivity. Concordantly, I answered the questions of participants before and after the interviews, informed research participants of the purpose of the study, possible uses of research findings and shared my understanding of the key concerns with the intention to establish a non-hierarchical relationship.

On the other hand, for such a research designs subjectivity threatening the validity of the research may become a methodological issue that needs to be addressed. Based on this, “reflexivity is a strong methodological power realize ‘strong objectivity’ (Harding, 1993, p. 71), which rejects reliance on value-free objectivity (Olesen, Bryant & Charmaz, 2010 p. 425), and enhances the rigor of the grounded theory. In addition to this, constructivist GTM forefronts the substantiality, richness and relevancy of data regarding to the credibility and quality of the study. In this respect, sufficiency of data incorporates a range of participant views, constant comparison and data collection strategies to reveal beneath the surface to be able to develop analytic categories.

By attending to the quality of the data, combined method is an indispensable consideration which ensured the sufficiency of the data in this study. How the mothers explain their actions and what they say to each other did not always resemble their statements to me as a researcher. There were somethings I observed that spoken out loud among themselves on the platform seldom told to me and some other statements that are not articulated out loud even among themselves but let alone to me. As such, methods of digital ethnography and in-depth interview in combination complemented each other in helping me to develop insight into the topic and explore the social meanings through the detailed descriptions of participants’ thoughts and behaviors.

Further, Charmaz (2006) sets out a number of criteria, which also this research and analysis account -including credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness to evaluate a grounded theory study. In terms of the credibility, the data covers a number of depth observations of the setting and in-depth interviews with a range of participants as to enable me to make comparisons between categories, establish resilient links between them and provide an evidence of my claims and analysis. On the other hand, given the lack of a substantive theory that explains the nature of virtual social support experience in social media and its impact on real-life experiences of women within the specific cultural context of motherhood, grounded

theory is selected for this study. Originality is therefore an inherent particular of the grounded theory findings. This study resulted in construction of a new substantive theory, provides new conceptual resources and offers new insights into the question of how virtual collectivities enabled by the media technologies makes possible the maternal empowerment for women from a specific socio-cultural cultural position. In this respect the analytical categories and their relation provides a new theoretical understanding of the interaction between the experience of virtual support and the everyday experience of motherhood. The theoretical framework represented in the study refines the current ideas of feminist maternal perspective to the extent that the different levels of agency, ways and practices that constitutes empowerment of Turkish women belonging to a particular case. In the final interviews, I tried to open up a space for my participants to discuss some main categories with me to be able to understand if not all, but which aspects of these categories resonate with their experiences. Their participation in such a discussion helped me to grasp the common within differences and so forge a link between the individual lives and the larger social constructions.

Finally, Charmaz (2006) asserts that “a strong combination of originality and credibility increases resonance, usefulness, and the subsequent value of the contribution” (P. 183). On that note, besides a scholarly contribution this study makes which will be demonstrated in the discussion section in detail, I believe that the constructionist formulation of the research process enabled women to think critically about their experience of motherhood and the everyday practices of virtual community of support.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Istanbul Bilgi University Ethics Committee prior to any practice of data collection and any contact with the research participants. All participants were required to give consent following the provision of information about the purpose of the study, research process, terms of participation and the way the data would be managed through a consent form. Besides the consent form created for the participants of in-depth interview, another

form is created for the consent of the admins of the community to conduct digital ethnography within the group. In comparison with the observer role without revealing the researchers own identity which may raise ethical issues, this study designed to embrace the participant as observer role as response to possible concerns of ethics. This means that I get to access the research site as researcher by requesting permission and broadcasted recruitment message for in-depth interviews by admins was including the information to let the members know that they were under observation. Both the participants and the gatekeepers of the community were informed of their entitlement to decline answer questions that they perceive as intrusive and terminate their consent at any stage of the research.

As the informed, voluntary consent does not absolve the researcher from the responsibility to protect the privacy of participants, identifying features of participants were removed from the research records and pseudonyms were assigned to users in the transcripts throughout the thesis, which will ensure the anonymity. On the other hand, in terms of confidentiality, all electronic data were protected by password to restrict the access, and audio recordings were destroyed upon completion of the study.

5. MULTI DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS

Beyond the behavioral approach, this study, presenting an analysis of an online community of mothers, illuminates the transforming potential of this virtual space and the possibilities of providing support for women`s empowerment from the perspective of maternal feminist theory.

The aim of the analysis is not only to represent conceptual categories and their descriptions but rather the intention here is to establish a relationship among them as to provide an understanding of the sub-processes that insert the influence through a theoretical framework. For this very reason, the research design and the analysis, combining participant observation (digital ethnography) with sequential in-depth interviews within a constructivist grounded theory framework, has a multi-layered configuration. The following analysis first considers the feelings and thoughts of women about the ways in how they experience and live their lives as mothers, and the second, their actual experiences of the virtual community of support. Then the points of intersection of exchange, practices, communication and knowledge taking place online with the everyday life experience of mothering become the variables on which the impact of this digitally-enabled women-only space rested.

Coding is the essential process that sets out the relationship between the data and the theory in GT methodology. Correspondingly, in this study, the process begins with the line-by-line open coding of the interview data in conjunction with the analysis through constant comparison of data (including the field notes) in every possible way to generate substantive categories. By conceptualizing these codes, underlying uniformities and connections have been observed in which patterns combine and diverge, thus creating categories and subcategories. In this step, categories and subcategories related to being a mother and the experience of virtual social support were determined. For example, the categories seen in the model, such as Conspiracy

of Silence, Born to be a Mother, Thick Networks of Social Belongings and the subcategories they cover were identified and named. Once the core categories emerged, I first employed selective coding to saturate the properties of the related concepts of the categories, and for the final stage of the analysis, I utilized theoretical coding and based on the theoretical codes, I sorted memos and my field notes for the conceptual integration to generate the theoretical outline of this study. At this stage, the concepts are shaped in the process, and it has been identified how and in what direction the conceptual categories affect each other regarding the process were revealed. In this way, as a result of the analysis, a model that deals with the processes of transformation account for empowerment was created. For example, in this model, the positions of the *Being and Becoming a Mother*, *Virtual social support*, their interactions with each other and the axis of *Empowerment* resulting from this interaction were determined at the selective and theoretical coding stage of the analysis.

Within the framework of GTM, when to engage with the literature, the extant concepts or the ideas of prior theoretical works is an ongoing controversial aspect of the methodology. While the traditional approach to grounded theory indoctrinates the researcher to completely delay the literature review until the end of the analysis to assure the conceptual and theoretical sensitivity, in contrast, Strauss & Corbin (1998), as well as Charmaz (2014) adopts a more liberal stance. From this point of view, a preliminary literature review is different from the final one and “early reading in the field, therefore, does not eliminate a need to return to the literature both during and at the end of the analysis” (Thornberg & Dunne, 2019). Charmaz (2014) emphasizes the necessity of engaging critically in the literature of the field during the analysis with a specific aim to present the emerged substantive theory concerning prior knowledge. Similar to the point made by Charmaz, I returned back to the literature in relation to my emerged grounded theory for the analysis. While the following analysis is generated through my direct engagement with the participants

and the studied world, it covers the leading relevant theoretical ideas used to elevate the abstraction level of the analysis. Additionally, the final literature review and the theoretical perspective incorporated into the analysis serves as a source of reference point to position the constructed theory by representing the convergences and divergences.

This study introduces a substantive theory that the ways the community of virtual social support intersected with mother's everyday gendered lives is a complex, three layered phenomena comprising of three interconnected dimensions, main categories of each and their subcategories.

The first dimension relates to the individual participants' experience of being a mother in relation to the current socio-cultural structure of motherhood. The second dimension relates to how participants define and experience the platform of *Araştırma Anneler*, both independent from and by relating to themselves. The phenomenon of empowerment occurs at the intersection of the first two, represented by the last dimension of the analysis. Furthermore, the following model, representing the conceptual relationships of the first two dimensions, forecasts the consequences of the relationships by specifying the concept of "vulnerability" as a condition of the process to take place during this interaction. These three axes constantly inform each other and maintain a dynamic social process of transformation. In other saying, the dimensions of motherhood experience, virtual community of support and the sense of empowerment simultaneously create and shape each other. The model constructed through grounded theory can be seen in Figure 5.1.

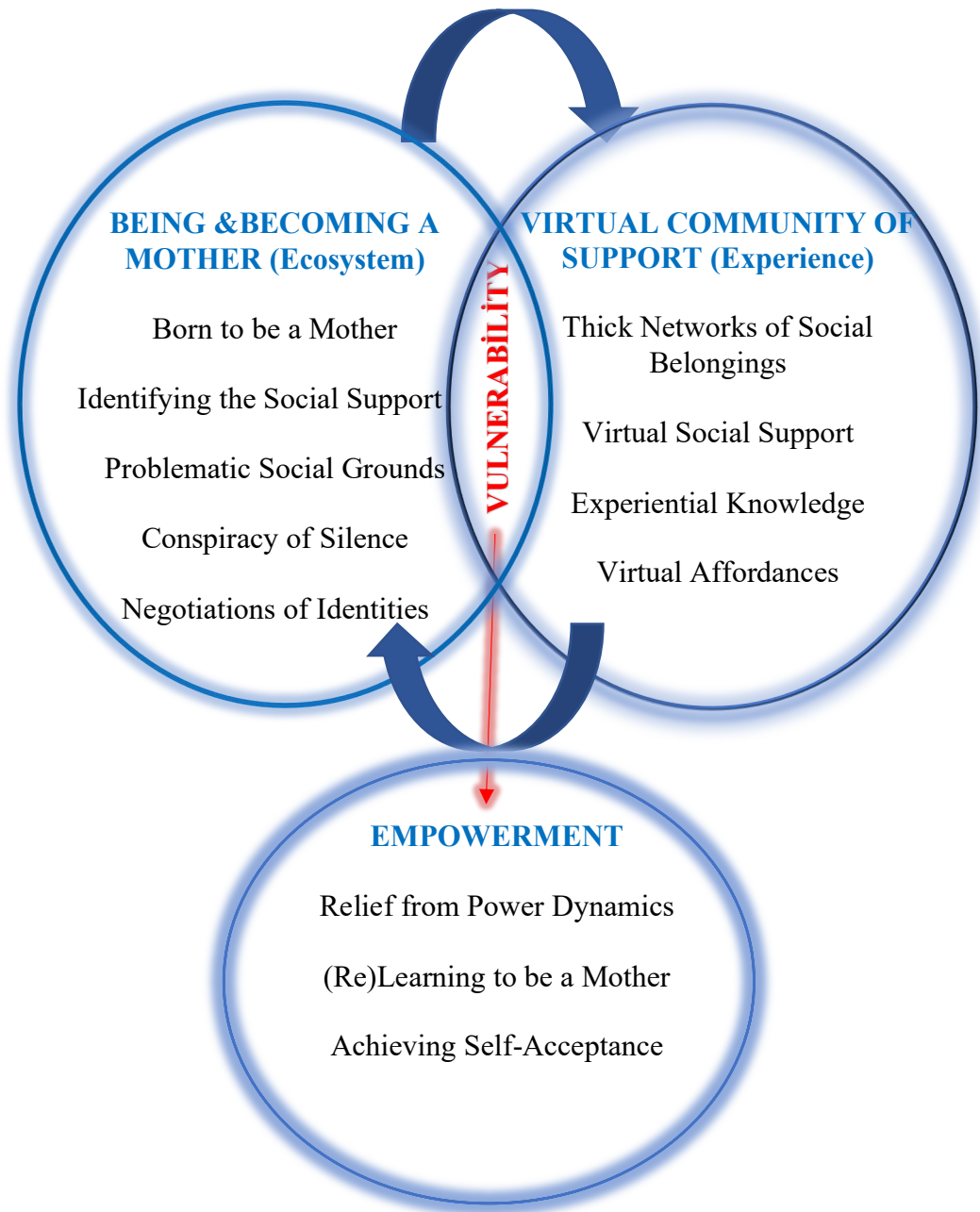


Figure 5.1 Interactional model of Empowerment through vulnerability

The impact of the online experience of support on the everyday life of motherhood is a complex, ambivalent and contextualized phenomenon. It encompasses a range of individual experiences of this virtual space and is broader than each of the individual experiences it is comprised of.

The phenomenon of how these women integrate and employ the experience of the virtual community of support within their everyday life has characteristics that are individualized and personal. Context-specific characteristics refer to motherhood as a broad context and the individuals' particular motherhood context. In this respect, different forms of motherhood shape the ways how women experience virtual social support and various experiences of virtual support, giving rise to different ways and levels of influence that the platform inserts on their everyday lives. Given that all categories are experiential by virtue of the phenomenon, the experiences of certain participants with a particular category may differ from others.

By concentrating on each individual experience, the aim is to capture the nuanced understanding of context and the associated actions underlying the process. On the other hand, consideration of the group as a whole in the analysis represents the patterns of connectivity, and it foregrounds the importance of the shared social profile of these women in the categories of experiences.

Consistent with the grounded theory logic, the certain categories of experience of each dimension were raised to a conceptual level based on their analytic weight and power of rendering the data. Similarly, subcategories were subjected to a refinement according to their relationship with the concepts. Each layer of categories was scrutinized separately to reveal insights about the dimensions but remain fundamentally connected and in this manner, applied to the research phenomenon.

The categories of experience that I outline within three dimensions are presented in the following findings.

5.1. *Being and Becoming a Mother: The invisible ecosystem of motherhood*

From the moment a woman expresses that she is expecting a baby, she gets involved in an arena where other women with children reside, the borders of which are invisible but demarcated in many different ways. The ecosystem mentioned here is totally different from the system that the female body creates for nurturing her baby and recovering her bodily trauma, as the conception of contemporary motherhood for a long time is arguably no longer predicated upon the tenets of mothering practices; feeding, cleaning, putting to asleep and rehearsing. The ecosystem of motherhood is the invisible manual of mothering designed to guide women through the choices and challenges of motherhood, including pregnancy, childbearing, mental and physical health, employment, childcare, social relationships of parenting, even sexuality. There are many other choices that have to be made by women negotiating this terrain in terms of consumption associated with pregnancy, education, medical and childcare. A woman who enters into the ecosystem is inundated with advice about her responsibilities and information about childcare by family members, other mothers, medical experts, which is further complicated by the various messages of influential popular media. The process of active engagement in the ecosystem of motherhood and its related discourses within the socio-cultural environments she is a member of providing a ground that shapes the way women experience motherhood, involving the identity she enacts and the practices she performs.

Ezgi: 'The society we live in constantly encourages you to prioritize the interests of your child above all else; what motherhood means is self-sacrifice and taking the child under your wings at all costs. It is doing the best of everything, so I read too

much and evaluate what I have learned to do things exceedingly good. And you know what, I feel too much pressure on me! After all, I don't do any of this involuntarily, but it makes no difference; I can say that I found myself in a particular form of motherhood I had observed several times before I became a mother.'

Concordantly, the first dimension of the model includes the participants' individual experiences of being and becoming a mother that reveals the processes of the invisible ecosystem of motherhood. These experiences are represented under the following categories.

Table 5.1: The Categories of Being and Becoming a Mother

Being and Becoming a Mother (Ecosystem)	
Born to be a Mother Inexperienced	Being
	Self-Assignment
Seeker	Information
Identifying the Social Support	Support Circles
	Spouse Support
	Previous Generations
Problematic Social Grounds	Social Relations of Mothering
Conspiracy of Silence	What Does Silence Means?

5.1.1. Born to Be A Mother

This category analyses mothering as a historically constructed socio-cultural ideology, providing an understanding of the connections between the historical ideas of motherhood (Russo, 1976) and how they emerged in the real experience of mothers with whom I talked with. The construction of motherhood includes a set of idealistic beliefs of motherhood mystique, which basically is that a woman born is to be a mother with all qualities necessary for mothering, and this is the main source of fulfillment for her.

While a few of the participant mothers have ever thought of becoming a mother prior, the dominant ideologies of motherhood have little resemblance to the actual experiences and social realities of these women. Most of the women state that they did not live with a dream of becoming a mother and premeditate it in one form or another until they got married. Rather there is a motive of putting it as far as possible into the possibly distant future.

Ezgi: 'The thing is; before I became a mother, I normally loved children, but I preferred to love them from a distance. I do not remember I taking a kid in my arms and saying, what a sweetie! Even when I was pregnant, I remember.

Questioning if I could I love him as much as I love kittens. So, I never portrayed being a mother earlier on.'

İrem: 'You know I was not someone who said that "I will grow up and become a mother (Laughing). I was not so enthusiastic about being a mother since I was young. I am actually a person who likes to hang out on my own, even to be alone, so I always looked at the idea of having children as; the farther, the better.'

Zehra: 'Although I have nephews, I had not thought much about whether or what kind of mother I would like to be earlier on. As a matter of fact, I was not interested in that issue at all.'

On the other hand, although all of the participants verbalize that they willingly became pregnant, they all refer to the decision of becoming a mother as conditional, matrimonial and familial rather than intrinsic. Therefore, the additional motif of this category of experience reveals is the issue of choice, which is referred to as “the myth of choice” by Ennis (2014, p. 2). Hereunder, what is often framed through neoliberal rhetoric as an individual choice is often not a choice in the full sense of a word. In this case, it is conflated with women’s decision of whether to become a mother and questions the degree to which motherhood is always a choice. A member mother’s call for help posted on the social support community of *Araştırın Anneler* would more clearly reflect what is meant to be said:

-Posted on October 19th,

2019

'Dear Mothers,

I am a mother of three beautiful girls, but Since my first birth, I have been exposed to psychological violence of my husband and his family since I could not give birth to a boy. I do not have financial freedom, and therefore, divorce is not a solution for me. Now, I'm suffering a great amount of oppression to give birth to a fourth child, and I have no choice but to deliver a baby boy. Do you know if it is possible to determine the gender of a baby during an intrafallopian transfer? Please help.'

At that point, socio-cultural norms offer a little choice to women, and the decision of “becoming” is predominantly defined by matrimonial necessity by the participants rather than a choice.

İrem: 'It has been two years since I got married, and you know that there are pressures in the society, so if you are married, what is normal is to have a child. As a person who cannot surpass the general social rules, I was not expected to act against them.'

Tülay: 'My pregnancy was no surprise, but I couldn't get used to it easily. Maybe nowadays, I understand better; I had to make those moves that are expected from me because of the social pressure. It had been four years since I got married, and I had to be a mother. It created enormous pressure because I knew it was no longer possible to turn it back, and though it seemed like the process was under my control, and actually it wasn't that way. In parallel, the oncoming process of becoming and being a mother has continued with a difficulty of acceptance. In short, motherhood did not come to me with a revelation. It was formed over time...'

Berrin: 'For a long time after my son was born, I did not understand what was going on, especially when he was crying. I felt like asking whose child this boy was'

The articulations of lived experiences of these women point to a reality that motherhood is not naturally given but rather something that needs to be learned in the course of time. Ruddick's (1995) concept of *maternal thinking and practice* comes to the fore in the subjective experiences of the women that mothering is an intellectual activity apart from the fact of biology or sentiment. This contradicts the conception of motherhood in the form of dominant ideologies, but the discrepancy between the two works in tandem to create an emotional ravage experienced by mothers in the form of inadequacy, self-doubt and constant anxiety.

Zerrin: 'Do you know where I struggled the most? I was supposed to feel the sense of motherhood, but you know what, I didn't feel in that way. The first thing that I thought was there is something wrong with me.'

Berna: *'I think there is an assumption that as women, we are born knowing this. Do you know what society expects from you? You will give birth, then breastfeed, you will love that child incredibly at any cost, you will devote yourself completely to your child and in this way, you will continue your happy life as a mother. You have to understand if she is dirty, sleepy, or hungry. why? It is because you are a mother! Society expects you to know everything about childcare. Motherhood goes around with the formidable pressure of society that makes you feel inadequate. As a mother of seven- months- old baby girl, she continues as:*

'The thought in my head constantly is what will I do? I cannot manage to look after my own baby, what will I do, how can I do this job, what am I supposed to do with this? It's like an incredible sense of inadequacy.'

Tülay: *'There is an acquired behavior of a society that expects maternalism comes readily loaded with you, and of course, your spouse expects that too! The situation he observed in his mother was probably different from mine and it causes you to be exposed to constant comparison with others' mothering. There have been many times that I felt questioned by my husband for not having such a sense of motherhood. I felt guilty about all this, as if I was a selfish person, especially because the mother profiles you observe are very different from what you are and how you feel.'*

In opposition to the ideas of existing studies asserting that women's expectations of motherhood are affected by the public discourses or discourses of various dominant ideologies of motherhood (Stoppard, 2000), many of the participants did not describe having a particular romanticized or idealized view of motherhood prior to becoming a mother. Rather there was a sense that they did not have a particular picture, pre-conceptions of motherhood or ideas influencing how they were going to be a good mother. How much they caught unaware was most clearly articulated told by them. So, what challenged them from the outset was not specific prior ideas

that they departed with but, it was being totally inexperienced with what the mothering would be like.

Berna: 'Motherhood was such a shock for me! I do not know, what I think was that I will be leaving her to sleep, but no, not sleeping! I think I will nurse, but he cannot catch the breast. Above all else, I thought that things would happen in their natural course, but a ton of things are not actually happening. It took a lot of work, learning and pain for women. So, I thought they were acting like a six month when they were born.'

Zehra: 'Before my child was born, I hardly thought about how to enact the role of motherhood or what kind of mother I will be. After being a mother, it was like facing my fears alone. I was a mother who was afraid of her own child at the time of my first motherhood. I did not understand why she was crying. Whenever she cried, I began to cry desperately. How would I know? Think this way; I also had a child at the same time as my husband. I did not have that kind of power either. So, there is exactly not a congenital situation here. The emotional approach to having a child may be due to the nature of women, but just as a man who does not know how to care, a woman does not come into the world with an innate knowledge of child-raising; she learns it over time'.

Although there is a sense that participants have no particular picture of motherhood earlier on, it does not amount to that they necessarily know how their ideas about the role of parenting formed or what influenced it. Either stay at home or employed, almost all of my participants belong to a common social class, living in the major cities of Turkey and are highly educated women coming from a nuclear familial context including an educated and professional father. Nevertheless, a particular family configuration “that continue to place the primary responsibility of household labor and caregiving on women” (O’Reilly, 2016, p. 44) was implicit in the

narratives of many of the participants. Inexperience challenges women in various ways according to their position of being a primary responsible of their children.

Berna: 'I think I am dealing with a lot of things compared to my husband, but on the other hand, I knew that it would be like this because his career is always his first priority. I also work very hard but my career is less important and dispensable in his mind in the context of parenting. Actually, the same is true for all women. I'd drive myself crazy if I expected him to do it. I knew from the very beginning that he wouldn't do it, so I don't have that kind of expectation from him.'

Yaren, an academic but currently stay at home mother of a girl, puts it into words as: 'I was a very active person before I became a mother. I had been working since the beginning of my university education, and after I became a mother, I stayed at home to take care of the child, as my spouse was also working. I mean, I chose such a profession thinking that I would take it with motherhood, but I cannot do it now. It was a very difficult process for me as if I was a single mother. The biggest challenge was dealing with a great sense of responsibility as an inexperienced mother.'

İrem: 'There is a feeling of being more responsible about this issue and especially feeling more responsible for a decision that may be made wrong. It is as if I am the first person responsible for the child, but it becomes to feel as this is normal. Actually, I accept it consciously because if I go too far about the shared responsibility, it will rivet society's gaze on me and it seems that it is all best for the peace of the marriage.'

None of the mothers has ever thought of daily mothering works as easy, but when I asked women what is the most challenging thing for them beyond the daily

practice of motherhood was, almost all of them spoke about the maternal guilt they feel all the time because of the great sense of uncertainty about what was considered normal what was not. They reported a constant fear of doing things wrong and they explained that they make their decisions under a great sense of stress due to their assigned position of primary caregiver.

Berna: I wish I did not have to deal with it alone. Because I am aware of the fact that there is no one other than me who cares about, follow and guide the daily issues of my child. Simply put, my daughter got sick last week and at the end of the day a person whom you are responsible for becomes sick, I mean, was it because of me? Did I make her sick? You think of hundreds of things and you don't know which one is normal and which one is not...'

Herewith the primary care-giver role of women, neither the feeling of guilt grows out of it, nor the inexperience women feel limited to new motherhood. Motherhood is an evolving and ongoing process that continues to assume different responsibilities as new milestones are attained by them and their children. Irem, a stay-at-home mother, explains her situation as: *'I am a mother of two children, one of which is almost nine years old, but I still have feelings of maternal guilt which means that it will never end. For this to be possible, there must be someone else possessing the same level of responsibility with me.'*

Mothers in Turkish culture are responsible for the past, present and future of their children rather than that of themselves. Most of the time, it is a mother who should apologize for what her child did wrong or what he/she cannot do. Basically, the cultural code of motherhood in Turkish society is referred to as "self-sacrifice" (Kagıtcıbası, & Ataca, 2005). Consistently, the participant mothers in the study mention their child as a central theme of both their individual and matrimonial cohabitation during our conversations. It was such a dominant theme that has

become a persistent challenge in the interviews, which I hardly overcome while opening their actions, statements and feelings to their own self or other possibilities outside that of their children. I think it is crucial to understand that these women exceedingly embrace individual responsibility for their child's well-being in every aspect. If so, what does it mean to be responsible for a person's life for these women I speak to? It means making the right choice for the well-being of their children in the face of uncertainty and inexperience. The role of being a primary caretaker has challenged women in different ways according to their specific context of motherhood. In this regard, the personal story of Beyza– a 43-year-old mother with 12-year-old twins– and her feelings associated with motherhood she experiences are very stunning:

Beyza: 'I came back home from the hospital with two healthy children, but within 3 months, I learned that one of my twins had a very serious and fatal illness. When I learned that my child was going to die, I said to those around me that I wanted to resign from my motherhood. Do you know what they said? You are a cow, and you have to give milk. So, I didn't just switch to motherhood, I had to learn to be a doctor, a nurse, a physiotherapist. It is very, very rare that a father can do these things. I have definitely a very tired body because it is a very heavy responsibility. Motherhood is something for me that does not kill me with pain but makes me crawl.'

The research from various disciplines, focusing on parenting/motherhood (Tardy & Hale, 1998; Bernhardt & Felter, 2004; Fisher & Landry, 2007), assert that women as typically primary caregivers become active information seekers originated with being and becoming a mother. Even though information-seeking is highly associated with new motherhood and the practicalities of daily care (Davis, 2015), the experiences of respondents reveal that information-seeking necessities women to profoundly engage the complex web of the maternal ecosystem.

Mothering is an individualized experience framed by the individual's personal contexts, beliefs, values, worldviews, educational, economic and social status. The process of assuming a mothering role and learning how to mother involves a number of decisions women need to make, which are driven by information-seeking. The findings of the study are consistent with the idea that motherhood is a phenomenon which is information intensive (Davis, 2015), and the participant mothers highlight the importance of information as a way of overcoming uncertainty they feel, making sense of their experience and minimizing the risk of any decision they have to make and developing self-confidence. While mothers value information that is based on expertise and scientific knowledge, they tend to focus on a vast array of information, including advice, ideas and first-person account. Crucially, the information experience of these women is also realized within the spaces of digital media consisting of parenting sites, mommy blogs and Facebook mothering communities. Information seeking efforts related to the mothering work as part of everyday life is inseparable from what Wilson & Yochim (2017) call "the digital mundane". This category explores how women experience informational environments of motherhood as an aspect of the maternal ecosystem and reveals the characteristics of these narratives and discourses that they experience as information. In terms of that, women who interact with information, do so through the navigation of politics around the choices of a plethora of acts related to contentious topics of mothering, including breastfeeding, returning to work, mothering approach, nursing, self-care, physical appearance and so on... The information experience of the mothers I speak to helps us to understand the myriad of ways women have to negotiate around the political aspects of mothering while they seek relief from daily hardships through information. It allows us to see the ways how the information these women come to absorb on a daily basis constantly shapes their conception, identity and practices of motherhood. Ezgi, one of the mothers I interviewed explains it as *'I look into every detail about raising a child and learn because it always feels like as if I always know what it's like to be a*

mother from the very beginning, and it makes me feel that I always have been a mother.'

While women try to stabilize their life through information-seeking, be they in the form of expert, advice, research claim or popular media sources, their lives get more complicated with the proliferation of these narratives including their critiques, and most of the times mothers feel like they are penalized by the intensified sense of guilt, role strain and inadequacy. This does not only imply the ways how the circulated narratives, discourses or knowledge treat women who are mothers but also the diverse responses of women to the challenge of sense-making of this knowledge. In this regard, the process of learning how to mother offers a personal reflection on the knowledge engaged with and requires an adjustment accordingly.

The mothers I spoke to during the interviews felt compelled to get experts' insights into appropriate child-rearing, and they were all striving to do their best to achieve this by engaging in mothering practices that varied in qualities and their combinations. When I asked what they mean by “doing the best of everything”, the articulations of appropriate mothering are centralized around a contemporary model of motherhood, associated with the practices and qualities taking the form of what Hays (1996) calls “intensive motherhood”.

İrem: 'Well, for those like me, doing the best of everything amounts to the obligation of thinking and making decisions by looking at today's patterns of motherhood. I cannot think of myself as independent from the contemporary environment of motherhood. Raising children to keep up with the entailments of the modern world becomes a priority in the daily practices of my motherhood.'

Child-rearing ideologies differ across the cultures and historical periods we belong in, and countless possibilities of mothering make it seems bizarre that women today

under the image of modern motherhood continue to subscribe to the methods and expectations of “intensive motherhood”. As Hays (1996) asserts, these methods are “construed as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbed, labor-intensive and financially expensive” (p. 14).

The findings of the category replace “the class” at the heart of the contemporary model of appropriate mothering. The social class and the economic condition of these women intersect with the current intensive mothering scripts that require a high investment in child-rearing. The pressure stemmed from the intersection of class and the current infrastructure of motherhood redound on the feelings of Tülay, with a master degree: working mother: *‘Motherhood is something that should happen in a natural course. I don't think the women in rural areas are worried about the same things as me. OK, they probably have different concerns, but we are subject to more modern pressures.*

Araştıran Anneler also features too many posts of mothers who are seeking advice about “the best of everything”; it can be a thing, a practice, or expertise. Many of these are from employed women trying to perform socially appropriate mothering for the social class they believe that they belong to. The best activities for the child development, the best language teacher, best primary school, best child car seat, the required breast-feeding time, and not to mention psychiatrists, speech disorder therapists, sleep coaches, orthodontists... The list grows to include the following post shared on the platform.

- *Posted on May 25th,
2020*

'Hello dear mothers, normally I search at length and find the best, but I don't have time for this right now. Which equipment would you recommend for a 1-year-old to learn swimming?'

The logic that today's appropriate motherhood requires an investment of a large amount of time in information-seeking and learning how to process motherhood is imposed by this ecosystem. Participation in the ecosystem becomes an impulse and necessity for women rather than a desire, and their accounts of information-seeking reveal how it is internalized and naturalized.

Berna: 'You know, as a girl coming from a modern family, it is expected of us to graduate from a university and get into working life, and all through our life, we are always told that we can succeed if we work or study hard. In other words, the more you read and learn, the more success you will achieve. Motherhood is part of the same coding. So, if I prepare myself for motherhood academically, if I read all the books, if I know everything about it, I feel like I would be a good and successful mother.'

Selin: 'It is like a habit of us and of generations similar to ours. If I am going to be a mother, then I start by reading thousands of parenting books.'

The maternal ecosystem, of which intense motherhood is a part, encourages women to participate in the informational networks, which become a template for belonging. There is a sense that many of the participants are proud of themselves for being a researcher and knowledgeable mother. It seems that being informed is more important than ever as a way of sustaining the modern self-representation for mothers.

The manual of being a mother circulated by various sources of information manual brings motherhood practices to a whole new level of expectations in the mind of mothers, and most of them articulate that their information experience results in a doubled uncertainty; intensified initial feeling of inadequacy, maternal guilt and role strain. In this respect, how the informational terrain of motherhood treats women reflects on their individual experiences as in the following examples.

İrem: I think that the information age is harmful to us. When we do not know how to do something, we go after the information. First, we read it, and as we read it, we understand that everything needs to be done according to what is best for the child. And guess what? We feel compelled to investigate even more to make sure we don't miss anything and to get rid of this feeling of guilt. You have to do everything perfectly, you have to feel guilty if your kid is missing something; there is a weird pressure because of that.'

Tülay: 'The media today is the place where motherhood is most exaggerated and imposed as if it were above all else. The mother in the media is a beautiful woman, making organic jam, dressing her child in organic clothes, wonderfully happy, but the facts are not like that. And every day, I try to stay alert so as not to get caught up in it and not feel any more guilt.'

Berna: 'Now we get a lot of information on the internet, but all the information I read and acquired creates different stress because you inevitably compare it with your own motherhood, which comes backs to you as guilt and inadequacy. The only thing I need is to become relax a little bit, but it doesn't happen that way.'

In sum, motherhood is suspended as it is between a woman's trust in her instinct and the information surfeit she experienced. These dilemmas are coupled with the daily emotional and physical investment of women. In conjunction with this, the

findings of the study reveal that a mother's life and her experience of motherhood are deeply affected by the existence, type, quality and level of social support she has the ability to receive. How to care other than that provided by a mother as to be encapsulating fathering could be transformed to support in contemporary society greatly affect the practice of mothering, and it deserves our close attention as an index of the motherhood women experience today. The following category of being a mother concerns the social support experience of the mothers in the context of their physical, social world.

5.1.2. Identifying the Social Support Experience

The support women receive in the context of motherhood comes into our mix as one of the factors that shape the motherhood experience of women. The widely accepted and broad definition of social support is “any process through which social relations might promote health and well-being” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 4). The findings grounded in the participants' account of themselves address the unspoken about the forms and sources of support available to these women within the maternal ecosystem by giving a voice to many different mothers to a degree possible. In this respect, moving beyond the accepted definition of social support in the literature, the category deals with women's own definitions of support, identifying their need for it and how they experience the one available. The experiential category of support reveals that the mothers seek to receive both emotional and informational support in their everyday life of motherhood. While in the physical environment, participants' perceived circles of support can be categorized as include spouse support, previous generation mothers, close friends and day/night care providers, and in an online environment this particularly includes virtual communities of mothers on Facebook. In examining the process of receiving support through social relations, including parenting, I identify four common themes in the interviews: participants tend to exclude previous generations of mothers deliberately; daily/nightly care providers (name as a nanny) are

considered as the main source of support for the daily practicalities of mothering work, and is referred to as “logistical support” by mothers; women consider close friends with similar experiences vital for informational and emotional support and finally, the lack of spouse support stands out as a complex subcategory within itself related to support experience of the mothers.

The research from various disciplines considers previous generations of mothers as a valuable commodity of support for women to overcome maternal social isolation and eliminate ambiguity (Steiner & Bronstein, 2017), and the fact that women no more rely on the wise of these traditional support structures are attributed to a diminution of these structures due to the geographical distance and family separation in the contemporary world. (Coontz & Parson, 1997; Litt, 2000; Gibson & Hanson, 2013). However, the physical distance to their own mothers or mother-in-law is not raised as an issue for these women, and the participants’ preference of traditional wise as an informal and emotional source of support where most of the times non-existent or tenuous. Conversely, excluding previous generations from their support circles was a consistent theme across the interviews. Many of these women find themselves in conflict with a family member from the previous generation over a variety of things including methods and philosophy of mothering, lifestyle issues, allocation of resources, occupational choices, living arrangements, religious or moral norms of attitudes related to being a mother, which all are encompassed in the maternal ecosystem of today. According to the participants, the wise of older generations based on local knowledge and cultural traditions belong to an old world of motherhood and are outdated. Regarding the previous generation support, some of the mothers reflect their thoughts and feelings as:

Ezgi: ‘I do not want my mother or mother-in-law to be involved in childcare. For example, my mother used to give me lemon juice whenever I hiccupped it when I

was a child, and as a mother, I am aware that it is totally a mistake; it is useless and makes the child's stomach sour.'

İrem: 'Older generations may have very interesting ideas about raising a child. They give suggestions by thinking that we are living in the past and their bits of advice is absolutely inapplicable. For example, my mother's critical and negative mood bothers me.'

Simge: 'I am not talking to anyone other than women in the online community, maybe a little with my husband (her face goes sour). Especially I think my mother's ideas of motherhood are a thing of the past and I do not expect much from her.'

Especially regarding the exchange of ideas, advice and information, older generations are not counted among the primary people expected to support these women unless they have to, as they are not considered qualified enough for the contemporary model of mothering. On the other hand, in the context of emotional support, the situation is not more pleasant. While informational support is a means of building self-confidence, almost all of the women I interviewed stress the importance of feeling that they are not alone, being heard, understood and accepted as a means of emotional support.

Tülin: 'The logistical support is already clear; it is about taking a mother's daily workload and there is always a possibility to retain someone for it. But what we experience with our immediate family under the name of emotional support is not a support at all; it is a kind of redundancy. What does empathy mean? How can we establish it? What do we understand from listening to one another? You tell your problem to them and they begin to give you advice, instead of saying that you are right, it must be too hard for you. Do you know what support means? It means "I

can see and hear you.” Therefore, there is a difference between the support we expect and the support we receive.’

Berna: ‘It actually means that someone understands you. As a mother, even if you are thinking ridiculously and doing it wrong, it is not judging; it is saying that you are normal instead of alienating you from your own motherhood by inferring.’

Selin: ‘Actually, I started going to therapy a few weeks ago and the thing that I realize when we are talking now is that I actually returned back to work so early after becoming a mother because of my problems about it with my own mother.’

On the other hand, intergenerational engagement in the social relations of motherhood can be identified as a contributing factor in the pressure these women feel about being an enough good mothers, which this time derives from more traditional roots. İzım talks about her experience with her mother as: *‘My own mother is a person who criticizes my motherhood a lot, she speaks of how she exerted herself for her children. In this sense, I am a very inadequate mother and leaving children with her to go out for a couple of hours is an indication of this.’*

Tülin: ‘For example, I take my child to a playground with my mother and the caregiver is with us. Even though the babysitter is there, my mother problematizes that I am sitting on the bench instead of chasing the child, I feel pressure as if I am not caring enough.’

Yaren: ‘Although I constantly repeat to myself that what I am feeling is normal, I feel uncomfortable when people from immediate family impose on me that what I am doing or feeling is not normal, I hesitate to share with them. It is really difficult, I want to sleep uninterrupted overnight, but it just doesn't work! Of course, you

cannot tell this to anyone because it is implied that it is your failure to do things right.'

Because of the lasting social change between generations, it is not possible to make generalizations about the way motherhood ideologies and parenting structures challenge women. There is a sense that the so-called support of grandmas is to emphasize the well-being of children, but not seek to better the lives of these women. Rather, it is to enable women to perform the mothering / reproductive work and identity as they should be as mothers. The perception of the mothers in the research about the previous generation support seems to support such an argument that they function as part of the Turkish patriarchal culture reminding these women that they are the primary responsible for the work of child care and highlighting their identity as wives of men that organizes what Johnsons calls (1988) "secondary status" – the mother role. (p. 6)

The participants' experience of *previous generation support* provides us with an understanding of intergenerational social relations of women in the family setting over motherhood, which keeps women subordinate to their husbands at various degrees and forms. One of my participant mother's experience speaks very well to that point.

İrem: 'The previous generation of women expects you to be a mother according to the traditional female identity they embraced in our culture and impose its methods on you. For example, at my mother-in-law's house I can't even tell my husband to look after them as go to the restroom because as a mother I have the responsibility to take care of the child.'

On the one hand, these women from a generation to which I also belong while on the one hand, step up their labors by subscribing to a postmodern mode of

mothering considered the symptomatic of neoliberal developments (Hays, 1996; Ennis, 2014) and on the other hand, they strive to absent themselves from the identification of the traditional female identity of previous generations, which may hinder their efforts of maintaining the modern image brought along by intensive motherhood. The situation becomes more visible in the contradictory discourse of Ezgi, one of the interviewee mothers: *contradictious discourses; ‘My son is always my priority and the center of my life, I am trying to do best of for him but I think I succeed a balance in my life. I mean, after all, as a working woman, I have not turned into a kind of woman who sits at home, takes care of children, cooks and does cleaning like our own mothers.’*

Consequently, in the context of the moment which motherhood experience is examined by this study, the women caught in-between the traditional norms and contemporary mode of motherhood, which creates additional complications for them. When women become mothers, their self-concept, then, remains in-between the unfettered contemporary image of women and traditional gendered expectations of mothering. This ambivalence of motherhood makes up what Hays (1996) calls *Cultural contradictions of motherhood* and finds correspondence with the definition of Kağıtçıbaşı (2005) for the Turkish culture as split between the competency and relatedness or personal and impersonal. Excluding grandmas as a sub-theme of this category manifests itself as a different kind of strategy of these women for resistance to the traditional form of the dual pressure.

The experienced infrastructures of support by these women reveal that the concept of support in the context of social relations of parenting is as much complicated as the previous one with older generations and maybe is more silent for the women I interviewed within the everyday struggles of mothering. The experience of spouse support was silent because during the interviews, most of the women had difficulty in mentioning the lack of spouse support in their parental relationships and tended

to avoid discourse about the lack of support they receive from their husbands. It is also silent because during the conversations with women, the concept of support begins to lose its validity and meaning in the eye of them when the person women expected to receive support is the father/spouse. What women define in their expectations comes to be something else that can no longer be associated with the meaning of support. Within this sub-category of support experience, the term support emerges as a concept that needs to be reversed and re-defined.

In the online discussions of women with a hope of bringing some degree of relief to their mothering scenes, the role of men as an alternative to their mothering practice disappears from the mundane engagements with digital media. (Lack of) spouse support is not something spoken out loud among themselves on the platform but voiced to me during our one-to-one conversations through the efforts of probing beneath the surface and digging into their scene to explicit participants' implicit experiential views of it. It is possible to interpret all these contradictory responses as reflections of cultural power on the concept of motherhood in our society.

Many of the participant mothers state that they experience either a lack of or limited support within the current social organization of parenting; however, as briefly mentioned above, they revealed a reluctance to share their views of the father's involvement or absence in daily household and his practices and attitudes related with parenting. My data includes a pattern of other cases of tensions and conflicts about spouse support in which avoiding disclosure emerged as a salient code from the very beginning. Women's efforts of controlling this kind of information led me to associate it with some potential risks of disclosing. The words of the respondents give us a new way of looking at their concerns of maintaining modern self-representation in which the current family configuration is viewed as part of it. Having multiple interviews with the same individuals allow me to see how preserving information serves to control their modern woman and modern

motherhood identity surviving on a type of family configuration that is first described by Miriam Peskowitz (2005) as a *Neotraditional family*. This type of family construction, adopted by most of my respondent mothers, is composed of dual-earner heterosexual, educated mother and father and inspires a view of gender equality in parenting and household. This contemporary family configuration leads women to a different conception of social relationships of parenting and related expectations that do not meet and coincide with what these women actually experience in the real-life context of mothering. This configuration that evolved into a new normative family structure with motherhood is problematic. While the neoliberal family structure and the intensive motherhood they subscribe still hold their role of primary caregiver and the responsibility in the private sphere once the child arrives, women struggle to find extraordinary energy to main their high-achieving status. Based on this, one way for the respondent mothers to express their feelings is striking.

Tülay: 'I feel like somebody takes women a sleigh ride! In the primitive society, while men were responsible for hunting, women stayed at home and did housework. Today, I am going to hunt with all men within the modern realm of freedom, but guess what? Men still do not get involved in housework or childcare. I have to do everything in the house, including the thankless dishwashing work in the kitchen. Like other women, my feminine identity is in serious danger.'

During our conversations of these women's experience of motherhood regarding the parenting roles, spouse's support hardly moves beyond father's physical presence in the household. While many of these women state that they are alone with motherhood, within the social relationships of parenting, spouse support is described as a matter of choice for men. İrem, a mother of two boys, puts it into words as: *'I do not think this is an easily accessible thing. Considering that the mother has the dominant role in childcare in our society, unfortunately, this*

depends on the personality of the men you are married with. For the woman, you have to be lucky enough to have it.' Ezgi defines her experience of spouse support as "it exists only if hell breaks out"!

Very few mothers talk about the father's increased involvement or equal participation in private space, which is interestingly driven by the extraordinary contexts associated with economic forces or health issues. In other words, men's gender roles are affected by the particular contexts of mothering, like having a disabled child who is terminally ill, as in the case of Beyza. She articulates a totally different organization of parenting from the majority; *'What does a normal ordinary mother means? I am talking about a normal person who has a healthy child and a happy marriage here. My situation is different; so, my husband did much more than what is expected of him as a man. The socio-economic benefits including private health insurance for our child I could provide are much more than him, so he was the one who had to quit his career and take care of the household. That's why the roles of men and women are mixed up at our home.'*

It seems that the earlier understanding of masculinity continues to shape the social dynamics of parenting roles. The narratives of the mothers reveal that what puts the responsible presence of men into the play of child-raising most of the time is desperation, and the support otherwise provided with mothers are perceived as a kind of grace by men. In short, inequality of delegation stems from the exclusive mothering in which these women have to be practically and psychosocially responsible for and worrying about the wellbeing of their child, family life and marriage stability. However, mothers' own definition of support that they expect to receive within their nuclear family life uncovers a need for a new vocabulary set substituted for the term of support. Even though it does not reflect what they experience in reality, non-gendered parental thinking shapes what they expect from a man in parental relationship points to a kind of mutual engagement and

commitment to childcare and household labor which can be defined as co-parenting and sharing more than supporting one another. Otherwise, the narratives of men's support for women in mothering work not only emphasize the primary care-giver role attributed to women but also encourages the re-emergence of gendered roles in the current parenting structure. This becomes clearer in the narratives of mothers; support is the term that cannot be treated of in conjunction with the concept of fathering. *Tülay*: 'A father is also a parent; he does not help! He is part of the work not only for the mothering but for household labor. When cleaning or caring for the child, I don't think there is another sentence as miserable as "he is helping me". The words of support and fathering cannot go hand in hand. This needs to be changed everywhere.'

Tülin: 'The concept is important for me and the spouse support I experienced does not come to mean help literally. He should be part of a solidarity or teamwork. It is not about getting support with the things, it's about sharing. A father is the only person you can share the responsibility of parenting, others can only support you. The concept of support involves an equitable division of household labor and child care responsibility for me! But the facts are not like this'

Apparently, women still experience what Sara Ruddick (1995) describes as *Maternal Thinking* within their neotraditional family structures. While exclusive mothering tends to create strong mothers, who can cope with extra work and do not need help, it also puts these women at a disadvantage of choosing how to live their lives and limits who they can be as an individual. In other words, many women in my study, most of whom are well-educated, middle/upper class, act in the belief that they can overcome the roles-strain issues through individual choices in the private sphere. Their stories are mostly about a woman who opts out of her career expectations and/or sacrifices personal time and space to accommodate the current parenting structure. What is experienced by my participants is consistent with the

findings of Stone (2007), who suggests that “the fact that men’s career always came first the underlying and unspoken reason women quit.” (p.78) Berna: *‘I take a lot of responsibility for the household and the child, and I also say that I know this will happen. Because my husband's career always comes first. For example, I was working too, but for my husband, my employment status has always been considered as more dispensable.’*

Zehra: *‘While I have all the responsibility of the child care, I could not take it on together with my career. I got a nasty blow after I quit work. I had always been a career woman for ten years. After I quit my job, 24/7 housework and child care landed on my lap, as if I felt like a caregiver rather than a mother. My social life is completely over and now I am nothing more than a mother and a housewife. There is glass there, for example, and you are expected to take it away. The same applies to the mothering; they say it is you staying at home, so it is your duty to do so’*

In short, whether a woman opts out of her professional career or remains in the public space, contemporary mothers’ everyday uphill battle of creating a space for their self-concept gives us an idea of what true support means to them. What support means for these women is that it is a keeping mental distance with motherhood; it is a space beyond the private domain in which women can say "Count me in!", a space where they can feel that they are not alone with mothering, a space that allows them selfhood outside of motherhood, a space where they feel accepted with the mothering they do.

Berna: *‘Support is not only about participating in childcare practices, changing diapers, feeding, etc. It is about the feeling that you are not alone. For example, I am not a single mother, I have my husband with me, but at the end of the day, I feel like I am the only one with this responsibility.’*

Tülay: ‘I am so unhappy that I lost the personal space and time where I could be myself, but even being unhappy because of this seems not to be a woman's right, but a man's right. Just as the mother has to eat the burnt cookie in the middle of the table and the man thinks that he deserves the biggest cookie, similarly he deserves that personal space, not you, but himself. Beyond logistical assistance, support includes this along with shared responsibility in decision-making.’

Zehra: ‘What will provide relief for me is not a help for daily care; I need my own space as a woman and as an individual outside of motherhood.’

Berrin: ‘It means that someone is listening to me without judgment. It means that my voice is heard; my need to be heard and to be understood are provided for.’

In this sense, their narratives of support that suppose the features of mothering – free choice, co-providing, sharing and reciprocity– can highly be associated with a parenting relationship, in which the mother and father are more truly equal. However, mothers’ aspirations are out of sync with the reality of the gender imbalance they experience in their family setting.

This aspiration and reality gap is where a full-time nanny comes into the scene of the contemporary mother’s neotraditional family structures. Today, full-time care providers, improving the conditions of mothers performing their gendered labor, become the main source of support for both stay home and working mothers. While a nanny betters the lives of a woman by making the child care and household work easier, it does not meet the needs of the informational or emotional support of a mother. However, the social support community of mothers on Facebook, *Araştırın Anneler*, has surely seen too many posts each day regarding nanny issues, including finding a referenced nanny, unmanageable payment rates, run on unemployment nanny announcements and so on. Why does a middle-class paid working mother

volunteer to invest almost two-third of her earnings into a nanny? The first answer is more visible and obvious than the other; nanny support is a means of recovering the gains eroded once becoming a mother in the public sphere and maintaining women's existence in the spheres of life other than motherhood. On the other hand, the interview data reveals that nanny support serves as a way for mothers to compensate for the inequitable gender relations and female disadvantage in parenting and avoid the situation where an imbalanced division of labor becomes a conflict that may risk the stability of marriage.

Beyza 'A live-in nanny blurs the gendered roles of parenting; she shakes the division between breadwinner and homemaker. You become equals with them. For example, as a mother you are the one who has to feed the child under normal conditions, and the father is who expects it from you and questions this. But in the case of the caregiver, this is no longer your role.'

Selin: 'We are a modern family, but when I ask him to clear the table after the dinner together, he comes down on me like a ton of bricks. This is where the nanny comes in.'

In terms of that, logistical support is purchasable for these women. However, when it comes to informational and emotional support there is a gap of choice within the current structures of social support as depicted above. Consistent with the previous studies laying emphasis on the importance of the sharing among women going through similar experiences as means of emotional support and informational support (Madge & O'Connor, 2006), close friends with similar experiences are the preferred source of the participants for informational and emotional support. Women's tendency to value advice and experiential knowledge shared by close friends who are also mothers as a main source of support is a consistent theme across the interviews. However, lack of contact with a confidante or close friends

is identified through the stories of these women. Even though these women have some close friends around them, those either have not similar experiences, so mothers avoid sharing the issue of motherhood by thinking that they will not understand them or their number; hence the sharing is so limited that it falls short of making sense of their own experience of motherhood.

Selin: 'I wish my husband and mother could have been more supportive, but more importantly I wish I could have more girlfriends, but because of my own social life, and the ones I do have live abroad.'

Berna: 'Only one of my friends close to me became a mother, and our world views are very different, so I could not share much with her. I have suffered loneliness for so long.'

Ezgi: 'How many close friends can a person have? When I became a mother, I did not have many experienced friends in my circle. You don't ask anything or consult them in any way.'

Tülin: 'I could not get much support from anyone. Because my biggest misfortune is that I do not have a close mother group. If such a thing was possible, I would have had a motherhood experience in relief. For a very long time, I felt like I was psychologically uncomfortable and it still continues a bit.'

Focusing on the everyday topics of the community I observe and the stories of participant mothers help us understand the specific practices such as seeking to understand normal by accessing other mothers. While these women have access to a limited number of close friends, the practice of discussing their experiences and comparing their identity with other mothers becomes a process in which they normalize their experiences and make sense of self. While previous studies have

shown that that women's engagement in conversation with other mothers and the support received from them is associated with positive outcomes for women's well-being (Mauthner, 1995; Balaji et al., 2007), personal stories of the participant women suggest that their engagement in the social relations of mothering is not always supportive, but most of the time is toxic in my opinion. Physical structures of maternal social relationships in which contemporary mothering practiced in everyday interactions as a critical domain of the ecosystem offer a productive way to address mothering as a social organization and afford insight into a range of questions concerning socio-cultural patterning of motherhood as a discourse, a practice and an identity. In this sense, participants' own voice is the core of the findings regarding the category of experience in the following.

5.1.3. Problematic Social Grounds

While the limited number of friends who are also mothers is already mentioned, this category of experience examines the women's perception of maternal social relations (perceived support), how it is described by the mothers and to what extent maternal socialization can be characterized by the different forms of social support or whether women can rely on one another for care. While these women mostly value similar other's wise as an emotional and informational source of support, and similarly, the benefits of sharing experiences among mothers are a common theme across studies (Hall & Irvine, 2009), the current analysis reveals a complex picture of social relations among mothers especially within the physical environment which is often surrounded by the norms of intensive mothering in one form or another, resulting in a hierarchy of women over motherhood. Mothering is no longer a hinge on the women's reproductive capacity or an act of nurturing child's needs. Contemporary motherhood is a whole composed of varied qualities and a combination of specific practices, including mothers' efforts to develop the social capacity of children and secure their status in the social hierarchy, which I believe

can be precisely encapsulated by the term *Status Safeguarding*, coined by Milkie and Warner (2014). It is an attempt to make most of the potential activities, sports training, travelling or schooling to keep the children one step ahead of others in the society. The degree of safeguarding may vary from mother to mother based on the socioeconomic status or the cultural context, but based on my observations of the particular group of women in the online setting of which I am a part; I may contend that the woman who has a high capacity or ability is the one who feels most compelled to do so and is submerged in this structure of mothering, whether she is employed or stay-at-home. The cluster of specific practices, attitudes and a discipline of thought which Ruddick calls *Maternal Thinking* can be understood from the mothers' point of view as daily or weekly planning of mothering work, including the arrangements for socialization, development and achievements of their children. While many of the mothers frame the feeling of isolation from others with children by referring to the late modernity, any type of arrangements such as planning play dates or all type of activities also provide mothers with an opportunity to access others going through similar challenges and engage in a dialogue about the physical or psychological issues of motherhood that are not mainstream but known innately by mothers. According to the participant views, which aligns with what I have been experiencing first hand as a mother for eight years, the interactions taking place within the maternal social gatherings, at child's birthday party, maybe over a coffee or after school waiting, are far from making a woman feel she is doing a good job in mothering, but rather give her a sense that she is the only one feeling ambivalence or having difficulty in mothering.

As previously mentioned, for these women, the practice of discussing experiences and comparing mothering practices with other mothers becomes a process in which they normalize experiences and feelings of motherhood and construct a self-concept in relation to motherhood. Furthermore, sharing and exchanging between mothers is an important aspect of learning to be a mother for a woman. She needs to identify

the necessary characteristics of mothering work and determine certain criteria of adequacy to be able to act on it. In this respect, almost all mothers who participated in my study state that they engage in such a process in which they compare their values, beliefs and approaches of mothering with other's narratives of motherhood, more intensely during the new motherhood, continue albeit in a diminishing pace. This does not amount to a purely possessing, but rather an assessment to be able to conceptualize the success or failure, but eventually, like any other kind of thought, the concept of motherhood presupposes a society or community of which we are members, and in which there are rules to achieve common goals that shaped our ways of doing and thinking about mothering. The process of normalization ties mothers to the concept of *acceptability*, which Ruddick (1995) argues is not "merely a demand imposed on a mother by her group, indeed mothers themselves as part of the larger social group formulate its ideals." (p. 21). While the argument highly focuses on raising a child acceptable by the society, the current analysis pushes the boundaries of the concept to discuss the acceptability of a woman with her self-concept of motherhood and her approach to doing mothering. In other words, what is so crucial to understand here is that all those 15.722 women turning to *Araştırma Anneler* every day for emotional support and advice seek validation to be reassured that they are doing OK with the thought of mothering they embraced. However, going back to the social relations of mothering in the physical space, all of the participant mothers, though to varying degrees, articulate the judgmental expectations of others about appropriate mothering that makes them feel alienated by commonly held values and practices, and express a profound sense of power dynamics played out by mothers during the social gatherings. Although it is not possible in the scope of this research to precisely situate the acceptability demand on mothers within a class-based analysis in the context of intensive motherhood, it seems that any kind of ambivalence a woman feels about motherhood continues to be unacceptable and women's every type of choice is open to harsh judgement by other mothers. The interactions and discourses present in the physical, social

conventions are often experienced as painful, poisonous to mothers' daily lives and fraught with self-doubt, which I believe can remarkably be depicted through a quotation from Tülay, a working single mother living with her 7-year-old son at Istanbul: *'Being criticized and judged by our mothering applies to all women from different segments of society, but especially for the ones in our profile, like you and me (referring to an educated modern, middle/upper class woman in Turkey); we may not be beaten literally, but in our social circle we are in a situation that is worse than being beaten.'*

Zehra: *'The standards for maternal achievement are impossible to meet for me. Whenever I have a conversation with others at the park or somewhere else, I feel like I fail to fulfill those expectations of mothering which they seem to be performing perfectly. For example, someone talks about a series of activities they share with their child, and you say, am I the only one who cannot spare time for my children? It is so hurtful. The other woman next to me is talking about her fulfillment of being a mother. Motherhood is full of mixed feelings for me and the other's narratives makes me feel deficient and inadequate.'*

Berna: *'Motherhood is something absolutely guilt-driven. I monitor how others raise their children, feed them, put them to sleep and this intensifies my feelings of inadequacy and maternal guilt because women talk as if they are doing everything as it should be, and they express their mothering practices in such a professional way. Everything you choose or cannot choose is the subject of shame by other mothers. How long you breastfeed, whether you have had a normal birth, or cesarean section, you care for your child by yourself or there is a nanny at home, all these criteria that determine our success or failure.'*

In sum, while the primary-care giver role calls on women to decide daily an appropriate way of doing the child-rearing, maternal social relations come to the

fore as an important part of the ecosystem, provoking them to think about the meaning of being a mother and the acceptable way of performing it. On the other hand, while they spill stories about their social relations with other mothers, competition among mothers becomes a recurrent theme in addition to the theme of perfection, which they believe limits women's behavior to rely on one another for support in the maternal social world. Zehra articulates the nature of maternal social gatherings as: *'Within my circle, the women are so pride themselves in mothering in such a way of communicating with each other is based on poisoning the other side with the words. So, I do not know to whom and how much I can trust.'*

Even though none of the participant women prefers to be limited to a single thought of motherhood, mothers' state of consciousness of saying may be quite different from how they act on them. In this sense, women care about their findings during the social process of developing their intellectual capacities of how mothering is done through the narratives and stories of others and reflect on their practices of mothering at different degrees. In terms of that, out of the fear of alienation or a need of social survival, Berrin's account depicts how we become ambitiously reflective on our findings, only just because of a problem with our children: *'There are women in my circle playing straight in their mothering, who tell how well they regulate the sleeping time of their children based on a kind of expertise knowledge and I begin to consider my child's trouble of sleeping as my own failure, you know as if I was doing something wrong. Just because of this, I attended a sleep education by spending a certain amount of money, and you know what, trying to do what other mothers do has turned me into a restless mother.'*

Furthermore, when the thought of mothering comes to be tested by the performance in a real-life context, the respondent mothers argue that peers take themselves for granted to criticize and see themselves most qualified to judge women (more than anyone else) by the intellectuality and morality of their mothering practice. I always

ask at the interviews as the last question what they would like to see to be changed for women in the context of the current structure of motherhood, and the answer is always the same; the punitiveness, despotism and bullying women do to each other over motherhood.

The competition at hand seems not to be limited to women's high amount of intellectual capacity and labor invested into child raising to outperform others, but the logic of superiority also runs together with the economic realm, in which mothers think that they are pushed to engage in the specific practices of the market process as a facet of contemporary motherhood.

Izim: 'We are surrounded by didactic type of mother personalities and every day we experience the pressure they put on us. What matters is not only a mother doing the best of everything, but the sense of good mothering becomes increasingly an economical affair. There is a comparison among women on every type of thing from the brand of breastfeeding bra to puerperal pajamas. The conversations taking place can make you believe that if your child does not sleep in a Montessori bed, it is not possible for him / her to grow up healthy. For example, maternity photographer is a must!'

Berrin: 'Motherhood is like a racing circuit where the babysitter you hire for \$ 1000/ month for your 6-month-old baby to learn English puts you ahead.'

Many mothers I spoke with express an in-betweenness with their engagement in maternal social relationships and that they need access to normalize their experiences, but on the other hand, comparing and contrasting strategy turns to be the source of an internal stressor factor, such as self-fragmenting conflicts instead of creative thinking. Rather than focusing on the dominant media culture capitalizing on the so-called mommy wars, my approach here is to listen to the

stories of women themselves about their everyday engagements in social relations. On that note, it seems that the current social environments fail to provide support for mothers and opens up a question of to what extent the ideology of intensive motherhood has changed and is in contrast with the one manifested by Hays (1995) more than two decades ago. In terms of that, the articulations and experiences of the participants offer patterned constructions that makes it more accurate to argue that the expertization, idealization and normalization in intensive motherhood persist in the lives of these women in our culture. On the other hand, during the interviews I tried to give a voice to as many different forms of mothering as I possibly could, including a single dad who lost his wife just after childbirth, the only man unanimously accepted to the virtual social support community of mothers, in some way a mother in that he has been the primary caregiver of his five- year-old son from the very beginning. Thus, I had an opportunity to address the question of whether there was such an ideology of intensive fathering, once asked by Palladino (2014) in his work "*The cultural contradictions of fatherhood*". I was wondering if he felt any cultural pressure on him to be an ideal parent or care provider as a father mothering his son. While he was telling the story of the daily tribulations of his mothering, a feeling of guilt or inadequacy similar to that of these women was nonexistent.

The father: 'As a father, I took the role of a mother and I am so much involved in child care which I believe is so rare in our culture under normal circumstances. That's why I never felt any feelings of inadequacy or parental guilt. Because I started 1-0 ahead as against many women; I mean, I do much more than what is expected of me as a man and a father. This is basically how I psychologically experience mothering in my own life.'

Perhaps it should not surprise us to find that the idealization of motherhood has not something to do with the practice itself but the gender identity of the person

performing it. Thus, when a man acts as a mother, this amounts to compensation that requires a special appreciation and praise in the society, while a single mother simultaneously fathering has to put an extra effort into mothering to compensate the guilt and fear of failure.

Against this backdrop, the respondent mothers have a high awareness of the dominant media culture and its obsession with inciting the particular lifestyle and choices of mothering. Additionally, the participants mention the maternal ambivalence they feel and express an agency during the interviews by criticizing stereotypical expectations of motherhood imposed by media in various forms including mommy bloggers, and rejecting dominant practices and discourses of contemporary mothering. Contrarily, when women tell stories to each other about their experiences of motherhood in the maternal social gatherings, what they often share is achievements instead of sorrows and reflecting on their everyday struggles by focusing on the strengths required for performing good mothering. All that fails to create a realistic view of mothering and is far from generous and thoughtful. While accessing others with similar experiences is considered by mothers as an important factor in creating support for self-esteem, loss of confidence in one's self values and beliefs of motherhood seems to be one of the implications of the judgmental listening, the system of social comparisons and competitiveness within this current structure, which becomes a barrier women face accessing social support.

5.1.4. Conspiracy of Silence

Through the perspective of maternal subjectivity, how intensive motherhood played out today hardly allows for the expression of one's own perceptions, values or maternal self-concept. Pointing out a similar point that power relations play out among mothers, one of the participant mothers, Zehra explains that *'if what is*

commonly accepted in mothers' eyes contradicts your approach, values or practices as a mother, you are left alone with your thought of mothering.' Even though what counts as acceptable varies according to the socio-cultural context of the person or the group she identifies herself by, motherhood as an experience represents a category in which the maternal self-disclosure is restricted by the particular scripts of appropriate mothering while the rest outside of it is deemed as abnormal. In parallel, participants mostly articulate that communication among women are centralized around the perfectionist and idealistic messages of motherhood, while this not only alienates them from their own experience but also limits their ability to dialogue with themselves and others. Maternal self-disclosure is revealed as a consistent theme in the narratives of these women, calling into question the meaning of silence and voice as a woman's way of negotiating societal expectations. In terms of that, the conspiracy of silence as a concept holds not one but many types of silence. First, the term of silence touches on the concerns of who may speak and what a mother can speak out loud, so the voice included in discourse adds a layer of meaning to communicative acts as an agent to interrogate silence. From this point of view, the participant mothers assert that today's motherhood constitutes an environment in which most of the concerns and issues related to motherhood can still not be held in more public domains. One interviewee, who is a single mother, explained her situation as such: *'Domineeringness is everywhere! The number of topics a mother can talk about is limited and no one can speak at will. You cannot argue against the mistakes widely accepted by the society in the public. As a single mother can I say that the father does not take any responsibility for the child and I feel that I am overwhelmed by mothering and my child ties me? Can I say that I never wanted to be a mother anyway? Maybe I am struggling with psychological problems, but I cannot say that because I am bashed right there, first by the other mothers.'*

Zehra: *'After quitting the work, I started to feel more like a caregiver or a housekeeper than a mother, and this reflected very negatively on my child. A period of constant crying and feeling guilty for shouting on her. But I could not share this with anyone or ask help.'*

Researcher: *'Why do you think you avoided sharing?'*

Zehra: *'Because as a mother, I was ashamed of failing.'*

The stories told by the participants suggest that today's mothers operate under the social inspection of others, who expect them to meet both the moral and socio-cultural norms of mothering. Ezgi's experience on this is particularly dramatic: *'I try not to exchange ideas with anyone or share anything about mothering after an incident I experienced. Although not often, I was cooking sausages for my son from time to time because he loved it very much, but on the other hand, you know there was a lot of news in the media about the harms of sausage, and I was worried and not comfortable with that. One day I wanted to get the opinion of other mothers in a gathering, and was met with such a huge reaction like it was not something that a mother could ask. They behaved like I was poisoning the child. What a great shame!'*

The concepts of maternal shame and the internalized social gaze are redounded on the narratives of the mothers as a significant drawback not only for the subjectivity of women but the authenticity and autonomy in relation to their voice of motherhood. In this respect, what stands out in their narratives as a way of dealing with the current structure is avoiding conflict and keeping their silence. Similarly, İrem says that it also discourages her from asking for advice or sharing: *'It is mostly hard to speak up, especially on ideas that I believe are not in line with others. I generally do not want to get into a situation where I may be judged. I also do not want to imply criticism by sharing my feelings or opinions that conflict with the*

others, but we have come to such a point that we unintendedly label a woman who follows her own path of motherhood, as unconscious and selfless.'

In sum, the findings especially based on the in-depth interviews with the mothers reveal that motherhood continues to be a form of domination operating under the social gaze, more than being a part of women's individual lives, and relatedly demonstrates the serious problems with the conceptualization of social support among women, particularly in the material space. On the other hand, contemplating on how motherhood is experienced by the participants in Turkish Society, the concept of "the powerful mother" has emerged as a dominant code related to the interpretation of motherhood in the study. Cultures reproduce the prototypes of motherhood by specifying the ways of portraying and defining appropriate attitudes and behaviors of performing it (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). From this point of view, in Turkish society a mother is considered as the one who not only raises the child, but constructs the whole society and future of the nation. A strong mother means a strong generation; a strong generation means a strong future (Erden-İmamoğlu, 2013; Karaman & Doğan, 2018).

In the face of being a mother, which is presented as the most urgent and vital tool for a woman to prove herself, women feel it is up to them to secure the wellness of their families and feel that they must constantly step up their labors in a myriad of fronts just to keep the promise of their family survival and being a good enough mother. Some of the participants' stories include specific contexts of motherhood in which the concept of the powerful mother emerges more sharply. One of them belongs to Beyza: *'I feel like since I'm a woman, I have to pump power everyone around me. While raising my healthy child, it is I who go to work in the mornings, and wait for another disabled child in the intensive care unit in the evenings at the hospital. It is my duty to inculcate the tearful father next to me. I have to stand strong. It is such a huge burden on me, but that's what" motherhood is.'*

In a similar vein, another participant, Tülin, who is a single mother, explains her feelings as: *'There is a societal expectation that as a woman or a mother you are expected to be strong in all circumstances. For a woman who is trying to raise a boy without a father, this is what has been constantly imposed on me. However, the only thing that I needed was to shout that I wanted the world to stop. Damn this powerful mother definition imposed on us anyway, I hate this label!'*

Researcher: 'What do you think the society expects from a powerful mother?'

Tülin: 'What they truly understand is typically attached parenting in which your feelings and needs as a woman or an individual are absorbed and fade. It is self-sacrifice and the so-called powerful mother is something completely misinterpreted.'

The narratives of mothers seem to be chimed with the arguments of O'Reilly (2016) that the contemporary mode of mothering not only reinforces *idealization* as one of the ideological assumptions of patriarchal motherhood, but also “disguises it as an empowered, or enlightened mothering” (p. 14). On the other hand, when the participants talk about the pressure exerted on them by such an idealization of motherhood, they also attribute the poisonous nature of the social relationships among mothers (as depicted above) to this. They think that maternal self-disclosure is constructed around the act of portraying fictitious perfect mother profiles and their false voices. Returning to the conspiracy of silence, it seems more accurate to argue that the type of silence presents in motherhood is not necessarily the opposite of raising one's voice, but rather a part of a woman's identity in her negotiation of the institution of motherhood. As Foucault (1978) points out, “there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse’ (p. 27).

Yasemin: 'Motherhood should not necessarily be something that requires one to be powerful. But we prefer to appear strong instead of facing our weaknesses, our

sorrow or our failures of motherhood. We act like we don't hurt, and you know what, what really hurts is that! Actually, it is about managing emotions, but it is not possible in an environment where so many false voices are echoing.'

Zehra: 'Everyone plays out the strong and does not show their internal turmoil to the outside.'

Researcher: 'Why do you think this is happening?'

Zehra: 'I think that the issue of being a mother is exaggerated. It is like something divine, something to get into the society's good book. Motherhood is something like socially rewarding as long as it stays within the borders of social norms and expectations.'

Berna: 'Almost all of us are guilt-ridden. Every one of us feels a twinge of guilt about something different. Everyone is good and bad at certain aspects of mothering, but we bring the forefront of our maternal achievements while we hide in the areas where we are incomplete and failing. The purpose in that is not to show off, but to be accepted and be at ease a bit.'

Motherhood is a site of challenge in which the recognition of woman hinges more on how good they enact the identity of motherhood rather than the authenticity of their voice in dialogue with others. Maybe one of the motivations that we more or less subscribe to the intensive practices of motherhood is the intense guilt and maternal shame we seek relief from. The fear of being seen as a failure is so intense among women as this threatens our sense of self and identity of femininity (Parker, 1995; Peterson, 2013), results in greater efforts by women to portray themselves as conforming to the requisites of modern motherhood and silences of real feelings. The kind of silence I mention here is being conceptualized as the "Mask of motherhood" (Maushart, 2000) from the feminist maternal standpoint. They have a need to make sense of their experiences of motherhood through a

comparison of their maternal work and identity with others, and draw on the available discourses as competing demands of contemporary motherhood, unfortunately, features strongly in the ecosystem. Drawing on my ethnographic observations, this does not imply that they simply draw on what they see or listen, but it rather is a process in which they actively negotiate the available narratives of motherhood/mothering and have to decide which to take up and act on in order to reconcile the inevitable internal conflicts that arise as a mother. Therefore, it is important to note that it is not always easy for women to filter out the voice/discourse manufactured outside their own thought of mothering. In other words, their engagement with the available discourses of motherhood involves unconsciously or consciously attending to particular voices at the expense of their own voice or alternative others. In this context, the experiences of the participants reveal that overcoming the fear of disbelief by other mothers or society may not be as easy as it seems. As a matter of fact, in response to the internal conflict they feel, maternal thinking, as Ruddick (1995) argues, “has often opted for inauthenticity” (p. 103). It is basically taking on the values of the available dominant culture of motherhood rather than opting for one’s own voice or values. Accordingly, the conspiracy of silence is both the misrepresentation of experienced reality and a blind eye of women to the implications of the anxiety beneath the mask, depending on the situation and context. Subsequently, the term of “inauthenticity” provides us with a conceptual tool to discern the maternal identity work that the women oblige to engage in.

5.1.5. Negotiations of identities

The adjustment to the transition women makes in becoming a mother is a complex process that is considerably documented by the previous research focusing on the

psychological changes and identity crisis affecting women's well-being, especially for the first 12 months of motherhood (Rubin, 1984; Figs1998).

Consistent with the little research beyond new motherhood (Wills & Petrakis, 2019), incorporating the unknown self as a mother into the sense of older self as well as re-claiming an identity as a mother is an ongoing and constantly evolving process. While the previous categories of the dimension of being and becoming a mother indicate that a mother's life is profoundly affected by the disqualified and limited quantity of available social support, *Identity Issues* emerge as another main category of maternal experience which concerns how these women understand the shift from the identity of a woman to a mother. In relation to that, the two themes are identified: *Loss of Individuated self* emerges as a starting point for the discussion of the re-construction of self in the context of motherhood, and *Dichotomies of Maternal Identity* discusses the limits of reclaiming a maternal sense of self by positioning the process within the conceptualization of motherhood in the current structure of the contemporary environment.

The participant women, almost all of whom have put aside the self in favor of being very present in the lives of their children, feel not only the loss of a former self but also an individualized self within their everyday struggle of motherhood. As for many contemporary women, the interviewees, the majority of whom are educated, middle/upper-class women with careers and grown up to be productive citizens, feel very uncomfortable with the gendered expectations of society, which they think they are intensely exposed to once they become a mother.

Zehra: 'We live in a situation that completely contradicts how we were raised in life as a woman. You give birth and encounter a totally different environment when you come back to your life. I'm talking about a situation where you need to recreate

yourself from top to bottom, while this does not affect a man's life after he becomes a father.'

While they clearly state that motherhood became a central part of their self-identity, their articulations of the adjustment they make to motherhood describe a tension between individual identity and motherhood as a social role, which is expected to be performed under exclusive female mothering, whereas the lives of men are isolated from the core of parenting.

Unlike their own mothers, who hold more traditional values, these women grow up with new conceptions and expectations of womanhood; however, they encounter a sense of being excused from their subjectivity by taking on the new status of motherhood, which is experienced in the neoliberal family structure where the traditional patterns of gendered values and roles are substantially held, leading up to what Oreinstein (2000) calls the situation *half-changed*. Tülin, the mother of a 4-year-old and career woman with a master degree, explains her difficulty in opening up a space for an autonomous identity separate from heterosexual roles, which is patterned by her partner and society at large: *'As a woman I need a distance from the issue of motherhood and create a space and find myself there, but even being unhappy of not being able to do it is something to be questioned. After all, my husband makes an account of old gendered expectations by comparing me to her own mother and my mother. But I do not identify myself by the traditional women identity. I could do what they do, but I know that I would be unhappy. For example, I have intense work pressure as my husband does, yet I also undertake a lot of work of child care and household labor. He does not see those responsibilities as something of his own and when he helps a bit, he thinks that he is doing a favor. Then I think why I am working because I get so tired and get so nervous between myself and the expectations of my role as a mother.'*

Even though there is a sense of awareness of the detrimental effects of selfless mothering, it seems that it persists in shaping the overall experience of motherhood today and changes women's lives in ways limiting their identity, personal time, space and occupational mobility. On the other hand, consistent with the feminist arguments concerning the loss of female identity in motherhood (Rich, 1995), the difficulty the research participants experience in achieving a female identity outside of motherhood becomes a source of an internal stressor for them.

Berna: 'It seems unreasonable for me to prioritize myself and my job in the family dynamics I am in. I am trying to be productive and continue to work on one hand, and raising my baby and running the house on the other hand. While I was trying to have it all, my own identity has been shattered along with the feeling of inadequacy.'

Selin: 'Motherhood, business life, housework ... As human beings, we try to achieve the impossible. Motherhood has blocked me a lot. For example, I see myself as less of a woman.'

Ezgi: 'I can say that I don't have much of a life of my own. I don't feel much like a woman. I mean, I can say that a little too much motherhood has taken such a lead, it seems to me that my female identity has been gradually erased over time.'

Tülay: 'Society expects women to raise their children while also working. Having "it all" is not defined by ourselves. We are really getting tired twice, just because of this, my friend who does not have any housekeepers at home and raises a baby, who also continues her full-time professional life, got cancer. And she got breast cancer, it is not surprising that this is a situation related to femininity, which has disappeared in this mode of motherhood.'

Often women view their everyday domestic and mothering work as invisible and insufficient for a valued sense of self. There is a bone-deep need to be accepted and evaluated for their efforts and abilities beyond motherhood. Therefore, self-realization means an ongoing conflict for them between the individual self and maternal self.

Berrin: 'In short, I turned into a woman I didn't want to be. Being a mother is so much idealized that you feel you are not entitled to do most of the things such as staying out or having fun. Even, for example, I got in a groove of such a druidess that when my husband tried to be with me, I refused by saying my girl was sleeping at the back door. I forgot who I was, unfortunately. Being a mother is not an identity enough to feel valued; the idealized image of motherhood is not compatible with what you feel as a woman, nonetheless you try to stay motivated every day by doing the best of everything.'

All of the interviewees except one, are the women who have established a professional career before motherhood. Most of them returned back to their career, while others opted out after the child. There was a strong feeling by mothers that they needed to maintain their selfhood and related with this, constructing an individual identity as a professional is a strategic attempt for them to separate themselves as a woman who does mothering from their maternal identity. Because if you don't work, explains Zehra, who opted out of her career after the second child, *'You are just a mother! And your identity is defined according to where you put your efforts and abilities. Turning into a stay-at-home mother is so difficult for me. After quitting the work, I recognized that when you meet new people, for example the mothers of my child's friends, the first question is your occupation just after saying hi, and if you do not have activities viewed as productive or something visible then it seems that you have nothing to discuss or display as your own subjectivity outside the realm of mothering. If you don't pursue a professional career, you are nothing but a mother*

in the eyes of everyone including your spouse. This is the point where you lose not only your femininity but also your self-esteem!’

Unfortunately, the question at issue here seems to not only be a loss of femininity for these women who need personal space or time to make sense of themselves but be about being an individual that is asserted by the women over womanhood or being a mother. As Tülay puts it: *‘I have ever thought of mothering as easy work, but I lost the ability to be a woman within it. I would like to be a human being before everything else!’*

On the other hand, whether the rationale for the contemporary mode of motherhood is economical, social, or scientific, the irony is that for the women attempting to maintain selfhood through a professional identity, the intensive motherhood practiced out of work becomes a way to compensate for the maternal guilt and the ambivalence that they may feel because of they pursue their personal interests.

Selin: ‘Where we can feel like a woman or an individual is mostly our social life and that is interrupted by motherhood. The only place left that makes you feel such a way is work. That is why I went back to work when my baby was 6 months. Just because I did not stay at home and take care of my own child, I had milked at work for two years and carried them back home every day each afternoon, I spent all the time left over from work with my child, day and night, was unable to sleep and exhausted for a long time. Since I had gone back to work early and could not spare enough time, I was experiencing a great sense of guilt. With that guilt I endured without complaining about anything. I cannot say I enjoyed it, but let me say I just put up with it in return for my personal choice.’

In sum, traditional gender values and roles are persistent in the mode of today’s contemporary mothering, which is abrasive for both the woman demanding

professional career and staying at home mother running of the household. In contradistinction to the feminist research into the self-transformation during motherhood asserting that women bring a relational sense of self, inherited from their own mothers to their own motherhood (Chodorow, 1999), most of the participating women have a conscious effort to distance their personal maternal identification from traditional Turkish women identity of the previous generation, which means for them an identification with a devalued, submissive mother.

Eventually, these women who are mothers have an excessive puzzlement about how to live their life fully and how they could negotiate the issue of losing their individuated self. However, the analysis reveals that the emergent process for preserving the former self cannot be defined as the goal of these women –besides they consider such a restored-self unrealistic in the face of motherhood– but the process of development of the reflexive project of the self within the contemporary environment of motherhood.

The current mode of motherhood working in tandem with cultural significance ascribed to motherhood often does not allow self-determination more as a woman /individual less a mother and makes it difficult for women to create a space and time for themselves to enact the other aspects of their individual identities; however, it does not amount to that other aspect of their identity simply disappearing. Rather, these mothers I spoke with try to develop identity goals to have a valued self beyond motherhood, so relationally, a reflexive project of self is a conscious choice of re-constructing a personal identity, not contingent upon motherhood but reclaiming a sense of self that becomes reconciled with motherhood. But the process of reflexive project of self, inclusive to motherhood involves the ways in which these women practice their maternal selves through specific types of activities such an amount of reading and engagement in social relations of mothering. As demonstrated in the previous discussions and affirmed by the research participants, the knowledge and

understanding of similar others are important for women to stabilize their experience of motherhood and makes sense of their selves. The practice of self (Rose, 1999) used by mothers to make the identity transitions and forge a bond between the former self and the identity of motherhood, at the same time reveals a risk of aligning themselves to not only particular practices but a conception of maternal identity of the social-class /group they identify themselves by. (Bailey, 1999). The reflexive project of self requires these women to defy a socially determined image of contemporary mother, likewise the dissolution of the traditional ways of mothering manifested in the patriarchal ideologies. In other words, mother work for identity cannot be confined by the survival of individual self, but is also concerned with the complexity of negotiations women have to make between their personal meanings of motherhood and the ideology of ideal mother. For these women, the act of reclaiming a sense of self occurs at this critical juncture. Consequently, positioning the “mother work for identity” within the contemporary climate of mothering, *Dichotomies of Maternal Self* emerging from the analysis as a sub-theme of the category provides with us a picture of the boundaries of the mother’s reflexive self-project.

During the discussion with the participating mothers on how they were creating their own subjectivity as women who are mothers; the idea that the role of motherhood brought gender inequality into their social relations of parenting was evident in their articulations, requiring them to abandon the various ways of self-realization. But on the other hand, the effect of the commonly held mode of motherhood in their circles on their maternal subjectivity is quite significant. In other words, the findings point to the challenges posed by the current complex ecosystem of motherhood for women seeking to envision and realize a maternal identity in their own right. This makes me note that there is a little point in arguing the need of re-constructing an individuated self without associating it with the issue of establishing a maternal subjectivity.

With relation to the argument above, one of the in vivo codes – these are the codes “serve as symbolic markers of participants' speech and meanings” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55) –emerged as significant, so I integrated it into the analysis a common term – “*Just like you & me*” – used by the many of the mothers while talking to me.

Írem: ‘Well-educated modern mothers like you & me try to keep up with the requirements of the contemporary life and want to take care of their child in the best way possible, but at the same time seek answers to her questions about the ways of coping with the contradictory, complex and excessive demands of today’s mothering.’

When searching for the condensed meaning of the term for them, I explored that its connotation is not confined by the view that I am one of them as a mother or the rapport we established but it rather reflects their individual perspectives on the organizational settings of the current motherhood and the characteristics of maternal social world they thought they belong to, which also includes me. The term *just like you & me* symbolizes a mode of contemporary motherhood which we are caught up in not only in practice but in identity. Though the term should not be understood as a definitive account of a contemporary maternal identity, it assumed a profile of educated, productive women who are resilient to cope with the requirements of the mothering in the late modern age. However, the action the term encompasses and encodes for them evokes the everyday uphill battle of overcoming the conflict between the image of motherhood that they are expected to conform through a particular practice of a class-based habitus and their internal voice of maternal subjectivity.

In respect to this, the term *Just like you & me* additionally stresses the importance of accessing to others with shared experiences for these women to make sense of their sense of selves. However, it is important to note that shared experiences not only boil

down to experience of motherhood generally for them but encompasses an access to people with a certain level of awareness and similar thoughts about the intractable mode of motherhood that they experience today.

*Ezgi: 'How many people can one reach in this environment who have a similar point of view to that of yourself, who have gone through similar experiences as you in motherhood. I am talking about a woman, I mean **just like you & me**, who are open minded and conscious enough to realize that my motherhood is unique to me and not open to the judgement of others.'*

Taking full account of the mothers who participated in the research do not speak for all women in Turkey, but the voices of mothers in the community of *Araştırın Anneler* provide a picture of everyday life for some women. Therefore, both myself as a mother and based on my site observations and the interviews, it is possible to say that the daily practices of mothering and the images we seek to align has changed immensely so the way mothers socialized. These women become socialized by adopting the practices of the contemporary image of motherhood rather than the traditional women identity mostly adopted by the previous generation. But it seems that the code of self-sacrifice defining the Turkish mothers (Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005), or in the words of Rich (1995) “Selfless mothers and needy children” (p. 23) remained unchanged as notions of the good mothering, experienced by the mothers in our time, in our contemporary lives, all of which makes hard for women not only to construct a separate individual identity but a maternal subjectivity out of it that appears to be a prerequisite for the former. The current social practices of mothering demonstrate the elements of intensive mothering, as a social construction do not seem to be changed much with “the shifting family dynamics of modern family” (Ennis, 2014, P. 56), and is what still describes today’s mother work of these women. I need to admit that most of the participants are highly aware of how the dominant mode of motherhood detracts from their maternal experiences and often do not share the

values or beliefs of the form of mothering that they considered as factitious and intermediaries of the popular culture. However, women identification and the value women assign to each other's experiences and narratives as a significant source of information to act on it, give rise to relationality and works against their maternal subjectivity in an environment where the empathy abandoned by a judging gaze and sisterhood fails to recognize other's subjectivity.

Zehra: 'I think motherhood is constantly changing and completely influenced by your social situation and the social environment where you experience the motherhood. There is a constant exchange and reciprocity between yourself as a mother and the energy and the feeling the social world gives you; this reflects on your relationship with your children and your motherhood. So, after all, you compare yourself with other mother profiles to understand what kind of mother you are or you should be. To figure out what is right and what is wrong. I mean you try to find out your self-conception as a mother but in most cases it is painful.'

Researcher: 'Why do you think this is?'

Zehra: 'I simply look at the mothers on the site where I live, they take the child to various social activities, they constantly run and take care of their children. They act like they're not having any trouble at all. I am not that active as a personality anyway, and by looking at these, I feel like I am not interested enough with my child. If it is a subject that I think I am not good enough at, I get caught in between myself and their motherhood.'

Within a socio-cultural context, the process of constructing a maternal self through social relations with similar others determined in the analysis highly concerns reflexivity, but on the other hand illuminates the power dynamics innate to contemporary motherhood. In other words, the reflexive activity occurred through women's friendship with each other, or the relational sense of self-taken out from

others in the realm of intensive mothering hardly allow creative maternal thinking, furthermore frustrates women's imagination and implementation of what O'Reilly (2006) calls "an authentic autonomous identity" (p. 34).

While on one hand women are judged by similar others by the unrealistic standards of today's mothering, on the other hand, as a common theme among nearly all the women I interviewed was a feeling of insecurity and safety issues attributed to the modernization. When women speak about the difficulties of being a mother, they tend to compare today's motherhood and childhood with previous generations. Their stories demonstrate anxiety and fear of the today's conditions for their child's safety, physical & psychological development, the quality of education, and sexual harassment and drug addiction are among the variety of other issues they think that their children may face in the current cultural environment, all of which are also reflected on the digital mundane of the community of *Araştıran Anneler*. One of the mothers articulates how all of these issues put extra work on mothers.

İrem: 'I think raising a child is more difficult than it was a generation ago. We have been exposed to stories that bad things happen almost every day that make me think about it. Although the possibilities of the modern world seem to have made motherhood easier, the opposite is true.

Nowadays, I cannot give my children freedom to play on the streets of neighborhood, which I enjoyed in my childhood. Then we are tearing ourselves apart so that the child has a happier childhood. You have to keep a close eye on the children, arrange play dates, you have to sign them up for various activities and lessons for healthy development. All of which depend on us as a mother and we put up with all these modern pressures as women at the expense of ourselves because of the fear of failure and doing something thin or bad for our children.'

The findings inform our understanding of how full-time mothering comes to be a response to the issues of the contemporary world depicted above, plays an important role in shaping the ways in which these women create a maternal self and demonstrates the risk of internalization and normalization, “in turn limits and restricts maternal identity and practice to one specific mode” (O’Reilly, 2006, p.14). The contemporary world of mothers defines the women’s relationship with their children in a way to reinforce the dichotomies of personal & interpersonal or relatedness & competency. In this regard, as a mother, I may contend that breastfeeding as an essential obligation of maternal behavior is one of the most striking examples of it. Nursing is one of the most debated issues about motherhood, which is imposed on the woman primarily by expert knowledge as a necessity for the healthy development of the child. It has been underlined so much that it has become a matter of life for women and how long a woman breastfeeds also provides a significant advantage in the competition of good mothering. Not breastfeeding is labelled as selfish or seen as a source of inadequacy for a woman who cannot or does not want to establish this relationship with her child. In the context of this discussion, the following narrative of a mother posted on the platform of *Araştırma Anneler*, provides an example of the lived realities of mothers, by adequately addressing the complexity of negotiation a woman has to make between her maternal self and the dominant voices drawing back from the self.

*Posted on December 12th,
2020*

I've been taking care of my two-year-old son alone since the day he was born. I weaned two weeks ago a little willingly. There was always something in my mind like it was right to quit whenever he wanted. Now I'm so confused that I weaned because

I wanted it, not him. I feel so tired of breastfeeding but also regretful of quitting it. I don't know how such a sudden move like this has affected him emotionally, could it have affected him badly? I am emotionally devastated and I am crying at nights because of this conflict. Did any of you feel this way? Did your kids have an emotional problem? Can you please share your own experiences?'

The various demonstrated factors within the category complicate the life for many of these women seeking to escape the binding identities and practices of such mothering and makes it difficult for them to challenge the boundaries of self. To do so requires the strength of overcoming the fear of disappointing voices shaping the narratives of our experiences. It is sometimes the voice of religion, sometimes the voice of tradition, the voice of similar others, our own mothers or even some part the voice of experts. This framework of contemporary motherhood set out conditions for their interpretation of mothers as empowered self. As a naturalized caregiver, the capacity to confront, work and manage the everyday uncertainties to securitize the domestic scene in defiance of self is fundamental to the articulation of mothers' entitlement to self-expression as a powerful /strong woman. Based on the daily realities of the women, the dimension of being and becoming a mother and its related categories of experience illuminates a need for an alternative framework redefining empowerment, currently in which the autonomy, authority and authenticity of these women barely stay afloat.

5.2. Mothers' Experiences of Virtual Community of Support

Based on the multilayered configuration of the model created through grounded theory, while the first dimension concerns the ideas, feelings and views of the women about the ways in which they experience their life of mothering, this second dimension particularly considers women's participation in the virtual social support

community of mothers and how they experience it both in relation to their lives as mothers and express it independently from themselves. As opposed to studying the culture of this virtual space as separated from the real world of mothering, the last two dimensions takes a form where the data analysis begins to speak of an interconnected relationship between the two social grounds and the divide of the fieldwork between two gradually blurs. Consonantly the analysis of this section situating the focus in everyday mundane practices of this virtual location, first concerns the collective norms, values, specific behaviors as well as sense of belonging developed and shaped by the characteristics of the virtual space. Next it explores the actions taking place through online interaction which gives distinctive characteristics the virtual social life that these women including me inhabit. Then the categories of the dimension offer a conceptual map of how the women make sense of the realm of immediately experienced world and to what extent it allows for practices, discourses and identities free from the socio-cultural constraints of real-life mothering. In sum, this second dimension is a snapshot of an experience of mothers' virtual social support in time and place based on their first-hand stories of the relationships they hold between themselves and similar others in a single community of mothers.

Table 5.2. The Categories of Virtual Community of Social Support Experience

The Categories of Virtual Social Support	
Thick Networks of Social Belongings	Similar Others & Similar Experiences
	Accessing to a great number of mothers
	Wide Range of Information
	Faithfulness & Intimacy

Available Social Support Online	Beyond an Information Exchange
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Experiential Knowledge	Platform of Trust
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Virtual Affordances	Breaking the Silence
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5.2.1. Thick Networks of Social Belongings: “As if I am talking to a close friend”

Like the several specialized online groups of mothers on the Facebook platform, *Araştıran Anneler* community is not open to an advertisement for a membership. All of the member mothers I talked to find their own way to the virtual community of *Araştıran Anneler* with the advice of a friend as part of their information-seeking behaviors in the context of motherhood. While the information exchange and personal knowledge development seem to be an important factors initially motivating them to engage in the online network of mothers, the observational data and women’s own narratives unravel that the nature of the experience of virtual community evolves in overtime to encompass the multitude of states and intangible resources such as co-creation, exercising self-consciousness, self-discovery, solidarity, and connectedness as a result of long-term interaction with others, all of which are about much more than an information-seeking behavior. In terms of that, women’s participation in the community is highly associated with feelings of connection to a sisterhood, in which solidarity, reassurance, understanding and support are the currency. Most of the mothers participated in the study reports that they experience either lack of or limited social support from their close circles, spouses or families, and the difficulty they experienced in long-term supportive relationships they felt they needed until their joining in AA. Those experiencing motherhood in the postmodern society are highly

depicted in the literature as loneliness, lack of social continuity geographically fragmented living and inadequacy of the traditional circles (Collins, 2000; Litt, 2000). However, the findings of the current research suggest that the experience of motherhood is increasingly becoming more difficult for women not primarily because the real-life circles of wise women need to rely upon becoming spatially and temporarily more removed (Johnson & Ambrose, 2006), but the current social structure of contemporary motherhood highly contributes to the failure of women to meet the needs of others having similar experiences. As women we begin our journeys with a commitment to a great investment, effort and deal of time to motherhood and are totally unprepared for the devastating outcomes of trying to be a flawless mother. The potentially unsettling combative, competitive and judgmental social grounds of motherhood not only complicate the women's daily efforts of sense of normalizing but rather debilitates ones who struggle to create a sense of self, confidence and self-esteem. AA as a virtual alternative is an adaptive response for most of these women who seek support but avoid or are unable to attend the one in the real world, which is not surprise for me because my experience as a mother was nothing less than that and this study originated from my own membership to the group.

Whereas the supportive real-life connections are hard to find within the maternal ecosystem in light of previous discussions, participation in the virtual community of mothers provides these women with a sense of belonging to a sisterhood that meets their strong needs of accessing to "similar others" with "similar experiences". In this case, the sisterhood is a private group defined by a particular social media space they choose to attend and particular practices they engage within. Sisterhood is an important theme emerged from the analysis that underpins many of the other aspects for much of the women's experience of the virtual social support. While the aforementioned sense of belonging echoes textually on the group postings of individual members, which often begin with an addressing of "my dear sisters".

Reflecting on her experience of virtual social support, *İrem* refers to the platform of AA as “*a close friend whose sincerity and knowledge I definitely trust*”, which is representative of most of the other research participants’ view of the community.

“Similar-minded others” and “shared experiences” are separate but interconnected themes included into the concept of homophily itself. These women’s experience of the mediated motherhood is marked by an access to and interaction with similar others having common experiences. Aligning with the literature emphasizing the importance of knowledge-based resources (Valaitis & Sword, 2005; Madge & O’Connor, 2006; Hall & Irvine, 2009; Davis, 2015), sharing stories provided by other mothers and their first-hand experiences are highly valued by the research participants. These women find a sense of belonging by joining a group of mothers all going through issues, conflicts, difficulties and emotions of a life experience that is similar to theirs. In terms of that, digital media provides a greater choice in support groups for the specific population of mothers. A simple search on Facebook lists an ever-increasing number of virtual community of mothers. Similar to its counterparts, AA as a digitally-enabled women-only space has the capacity to bring mothers together by transcending the geographic boundaries. However, it is crucial to note that “belonging to motherhood” does not necessarily result in a sense of belonging to virtual sisterhood for these women. When I asked my research participants whether they had membership with the different community of mothers online previous to AA, many mothers narrated negative experiences resulting from the feeling that they do not fit in or have shared worldviews, beliefs, values or philosophies in common with the other groups they joined in. The online group membership of some of the research participants prior to AA provide an example casting light on the discordance women may have around values, worldviews, group’s approach and the ways of the group manage issues during interactions.

Ezgi: 'I have been a member of AA for almost 4 years. I became a member with the advice of a friend. Compared to my previous experiences, there is a very nice audience here that suits the attitude of my mind.'

Researcher: 'What do you mean by "attitude of mind"?'

Ezgi: "There is a mass of many women, and of course there are many different mothers and mothering approaches. But the group here is of higher quality, level of consciousness and highly educated. We can communicate properly, respectfully. Most importantly AA is an open-minded group. That's why they can offer different perspectives and ideas. I don't like classification, but before AA I was a member of another group in which the traditional norms governing both the communication and the mother's way of managing the issues. I unsubscribed immediately because there was nothing that this group could add to me personally or help me with, do I make myself clear?"

Based on the individual standpoints, women establish a sense of sisterhood through the connections they choose with others similar to themselves, rather than coming together with the fact of motherhood, which they have in common. While the first hand, experiential knowledge is a very important theme for women to participate in a virtual community of support, *shared experiences* and *similar others* are equally strong themes which cast light on their tendency to interact with a group of people who are socio-demographically similar to themselves. In sum, the feeling of being a part of a group and the ability to engage develops out of a simple fact of accessing to *similar others with similar experiences*, which has evidently an impact on the experience of social support process, establishment of trust and on the reflection to their real-life context. The same is true of *Araştırın Anneler*. As a group we are all united not primarily in the role of motherhood itself but in the similar profiles of educated middle/upper social class woman who experience motherhood by being

highly exposed to the pressures and high achievement demands of today's motherhood. In conjunction with this, these women are drawn specifically to similar others having similar experiences by the need of an outlet for their contradictions, ambivalence, issues and question marks they have surrounding the contemporary mode and cultural structure of mothering.

İrem: "Like many others, I try to do my best for my child, but while doing this, I find it difficult to think independently of the patterns of the contemporary world we live in. We are bombarded by the contradictory messages about what kind of practices and habitudes an appropriate motherhood consists of and our sense of wrong and right is totally lost. I think of sharing with people who know all aspects of the today's motherhood and who are experiencing motherhood under the same conditions as me. Therefore, AA is the community where women similar to me can look for answers for the questions they have in mind."

The virtual community of *Araştıran Anneler* provides a social ground that answers mother's needs of accessing to a great number of similar others with similar experiences by providing a communication channel for interaction. On the one hand, similarity is a great appeal for these women driving them to particular types of communities online, on the other hand, the concept of similarity has long been considered as problematic by some part of the literature concerning the online group interaction, based on the argument that homophily may result in the feelings compelled to behave as to conform the group norms, which may in turn hinder heterogeneous discourse and silence the voices making different choices to the group norms (Davis, 2013; Consalvo et al., 2011). This line of thought adds another layer to the discussion in the current analysis specific to the case's analysis.

The group of *Araştıran Anneler* is composed of women bound together by the similarities of social-circumstances which they experience motherhood.

Additionally, AA is an online support group set up not only to address particular needs and concerns of a specific cohort such as new mothers or form of mothering such as single, adopting mothering but rather embraces large pool of women coming from different positions and personal context of motherhood. In parallel, statistical information derived from Facebook data, does not point to a strong demographic homophily with age range between 25 and 44.

We are as women begin our journeys as new mothers with specific needs during this transition and then our concerns and needs continue to change overtime as new milestones attained by us and our children. Our experiences and maternal perspective evolved within the framework of the life events that life brings to us, which sometimes makes us to embark a motherhood totally different from the one before, as was the case for my personal journey. We seek to find other people as source of relief for our changing informational and emotional needs and relevant to our own life experience during the ongoing process of motherhood. Accordingly, the platform with its wider reach brings together a large pool of women who are at different places in their maternal journeys, have different needs expected to meet and have a wider range of experiential knowledge to support each other for similar life issues they have been through it. This is what primarily gives the group it's heterogeneity though it is a homogenous group of both career and stay-at-home mothers with the approximately similar socio-economic and educational levels. So, quite the reverse of the above discussion in the literature, based on the sequential interviews with the member mothers participating in online discussions; diversity of opinions, practices and perspectives presented by "similar others" on the platform are highly valued and sought out by these women. This basically constitutes heterogeneity of discussion in which women find relief.

Írem: "Sometimes you have beliefs and ideas you can't voice and someone else voices it instead, and you relax. It is even something important when it comes to

motherhood! It is something that is good for your psychology, a lot of people like you. You see concrete examples from many people on a subject which is an antithesis of your thought and it's something that expands your vision and your life. I really think that it is a platform where many voices and different thoughts come together.”

In terms of that, the nature of interaction is key and highly associated with the social profile of the group. The perceived similarity is labeled by the code of “like you & me” in the analysis, which refers to a group of mothers composed of open-minded, knowledgeable and deliberate individuals. Returning back to the previous analysis of the real-life experiences of the mothers, there is a feeling of disconnection from the social space resulted from judgmental expectations of others based on the socio-cultural patterns of mothering within their traditional circles which makes them feel alienated. Accordingly, the virtual community becomes an alternative arena where they can seek out a supportive and emphatic connections to be able to express themselves and be comfortable in their own skin of motherhood without making them feel abnormal. In parallel, the participant members think that they receive faithful and intimate responses for their concerns and questions without the interference of physical reality during the group conversations and the nature of exchange on the platform is more socially desirable and uncritically nurturing compared to face-to-face interactions that they experience in their real lives. The following verbalizations of mothers are illustrative of generally supportive, intimate and respectful tone of the group. However, this is not saying that there is no dark side to the group or it is a sort of flora that is totally immune to the risk of being flamed. Based on my insider position, my observations reflect on the variation and sure there are instances of arguments break outs between the group members. With respect to this, the tension between the concepts of “similarity” and “heterogeneity” in the context of democratic discourse needs to be treated in conjunction with the established group rules that members must abide by and distinctive characteristics and affordances of the virtual

setting, which will be addressed in greater detail further in the categories of the dimension.

Ezgi: “Women can share their very private issues and they receive very sincere and heartfelt responses on this platform. I believe and trust the comments and feedbacks of the women there. A refined but large group of highly knowledgeable women. What is happening here is beyond the information exchange. In one word, this is a platform of trust that gives me confidence.”

Selin: “The most important and divergent characteristic of ‘Araştırın Anneler’ is that it is a reference point with a realistic and shared worldview.”

Yaren: “What I always receive from this platform is trust, support and experience. There have been such comments under the posts I have shared so far, for example, I felt myself bundled up.”

Tülin: “For example, the woman who was subjected to violence by her husband is also there, and everyone is trying to give their best support. This is a supportive group whose knowledge and sincerity I trust.”

İrem: “I don't experience that bullying I experienced outside and it actually relaxes me more. Real life relationships are more abrasive, I think. While I find the group more sincere and realistic, I also think diversity of ideas is key.”

Another important predictor of remaining as part of the group is the relevancy of the interactions to their personal experiences of motherhood. These mother's view of the virtual world of sisterhood as being bigger than their traditional social networks inform their experiences of virtual social support process.

Zehra: “We are talking about a mother world which is bigger and has a wider reach than a real-world group of close friends a person has, which can be counted with the fingers of one hand. There is a diverse range of audience at AA and this means that there are definitely others besides me who share my personal concerns, fear and feelings and thoughts, who have gone through similar experiences. On the contrary, you are left alone with your own perspective of motherhood in the physical environment. It is very comforting to know that I am not the only one and there are people who do not minimize my feelings and what I am going through. It makes it possible to receive instant response from others with shared experiences.”

While the traditional social networks are restraining by the geographic homophily, weaker ties online have the capacity to connect women based on the situational similarity (Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright, 2000). Having an opportunity to listen to how others cope with difficult situations similar to theirs has an immeasurable value particularly for individuals experiencing motherhood in unordinary contexts. What is the probability of a mother who is in the process of transitioning to a single motherhood meeting with another mother who has also tragically lost her spouse, or with another mother whose child has a rare vital disease completely like her own? This is exactly what is made possible by this virtual community of support. The interviews I had with two members of the community, who walk a similar path of loss, connect primarily online but transfer their friendship into the offline world, sets an example for this situation. This virtual space provides women with an opportunity to make sense of their distinctive maternal journeys through the eyes of each other.

The fact is that the virtual community of AA, with its capacity of a wider reach, enables the access to diverse range of experiences and wide range of first-hand knowledge; the bigger the mother world, the higher the possibility of reaching others with similar experiences and receiving response to one’s particular concerns.

Recognizing trust as one of the key components for communities to thrive, either online or offline, several studies forefronts group homogeneity and shared beliefs and opinions as important factors in establishing trust among members (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). From this line of perspective community members choose to trust others whose advices aligns with their personal beliefs systems (Wright, 2000; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Divergently, my analysis of the specific case of AA reveals that the community members enjoyed the diversity of perspectives and opinions which they believe liberate them. These women develop trust with each other based on the perception that AA is virtually omniscient, open-minded which for them can be associated with the social profile of the group.

In summary, intimacy, reliability, accessibility (to a wide range of knowledge and a large pool of audience with diverse range of maternal experiences), making connections with others who have similar stressors in their lives and nonjudgmental communication are the most important factors emerged in the analysis increasing the value that come from belonging to thick social networks of AA. An equally important theme emerged from the analysis enriching the experience of these women's virtual social support experience and nurturing the sense of solidarity is the comprehensiveness of available support on the platform, which needs to be addressed separately.

5.2.2. Available social support online

The definition of social support, what constitutes it and the way it is developed has been an ongoing debate in the literature across various disciplines (Williams, 2005) as it's context-specific nature and meaning make it difficult to reach an all-encompassing conceptualization. However, the current analysis makes it clear that the information and communication technologies (ICT) having an impact upon the

size of online gender network affiliations accordingly provides their members with an access to a greater range of available social support within a same social network.

The considerable amount of study taking specific foci on online social support in the context of parenting and new motherhood in the literature (Hall & Irvine, 2009; McDaniel, Coyne & Holmes, 2012; Gibson & Hanson, 2013; Doty & Dworkin, 2014), includes the research findings presenting the typologies for online social support. Evans et. al., (2012), exploring the types of social support in an online group of mothers, breaks down the aspects of available online support into three basic categories including emotional, informational, instrumental/tangible support. Based on my site observations and pulling from my own experience as an AA member, the findings suggest that while the available support on the platform of *Araştırın Anneler* covers all the cited aspects of social support, the relationship among them is more complex and interwoven than the clear-cut distinctions made by previous studies. Though the online social support is primarily driven by the action of information exchange, most of the members I talked to feel that what they experience as social support in the group goes beyond a simple exchange of information.

Selin: "It shows you that this virtual support system we live in is more than that nuclear family or close circles. When you need help or support, you see that you can have that solidarity and, in this solidarity, an in this solidarity, there is much more than material or informational support. What you can actually get is a spiritual and an emotional support. Even though it's not my own post, when someone else writes a question about herself, people make supportive comments instead of being judgmental. Seeing this gives you hope, it makes you feel that you are not alone."

Emotional support is being presented by the community members in a variety of ways during online interactions and each of the research participants describes the different aspects of it based on their personal experience. Overall, these women seek empathy

from others going through similar experiences, they express a need of feeling that they are not alone. Therefore encouragement, reassurance and empathizing are the prominent ways that emotional support manifests itself through the online group communication on the platform. In keeping with the findings of Madge & O'Connor (2006), stressing the shared experiences as an essential part of emotional support, AA members realize that they are not the only one who have a feeling of guilt, inadequacy, ambivalence to overcome, through the stories and maternal experiences of each other's. They gain reassurance and validation of their experience, which becomes a critical means of normalizing their feelings and experiences of mothering. Additionally, non-judgmental group culture is another prevalent theme stressed by the participant mothers, which is important for the emotional support to be able to function in creating self-esteem (Hall & Irvine, 2009).

Zehra: "I think the most common question a woman asks herself after becoming a mother is whether I am doing it right or wrong; it is something you are always inexperienced with. After all, motherhood is not an innate talent as it is tried to be imposed. This platform makes me feel good about my own motherhood, because you can see what is right and what is wrong through the experience of others, and you understand that a mother is also a human and can make mistakes. It makes you feel that you are not alone. You see the things you do right and you feel proud of yourself."

Many of the research participants find this virtual community culture they live in more supportive and generous compared to the contemporary real world of mothering, in which they often do not feel ideologically comfortable with and where they think they are more exposed to the judgmental social gaze and competitive mothering. In terms of that following post belonging to one of the group members, including the gratitude of these women to feel that they are not alone may illustrate the transition they make between the real and virtual social grounds of motherhood:

Posted on April 8th, 2020

“I am a mother of two children aged 4 and 7. Due to the pandemic, I am trying to take my work from home, because my husband is working outside the home, the children are always with me, and I constantly struggle with kitchen and housework. I am very depressed and have crying fits. Children often have to spend time in front of the television. I suffer a lot of guilt because I feel that I can't really take care of them. How can I overcome this situation?”

Member 1: “Never blame yourself, because you are doing your best, it is important to realize whether the people around you are making you feel this way”

Mother: “I'm so tired of being constantly criticized.”

Member 2: “Never get discouraged, for some reason we are programmed to think that we are bad mothers if we do not do amazing activities with our children. There is no such thing as a perfect mother. This is not real and not true! We are all in the same situation. You don't have to do perfect cleaning or do activities with the kids all the time. That does not make you a bad mother.”

Member 3: “I don't know if I wrote this post or you did. This is exactly my way of thinking. Good to see I'm not alone.”

Member 4: “It's nice to know that I'm not alone (...). There is no such thing as the flawless mother, we all go through the same challenges.”

During the interviews with the mothers, there was a strong sense of disconnection from their traditional support circles that was most of the times deemed as inadequate. This leads them to a kind of social isolation even though they keep in touch with physical mother groups for their child to socialize. Therefore, the virtual emotional support which can be hard to find in a real-life context is highly valued particularly where women may likely be ostracized for having different maternal thoughts or practices than widely accepted norms.

On the other hand, the analysis suggests that the virtual community of mothers affording a wide range of audience makes it possible to establish relationships enabling network members to draw upon not only knowledge-based resources but various tangible and intangible support. The large pool of AA increases the likelihood of connecting with mothers coming from various fields of profession and expertise including pediatricians, lawyers, psychologists, teachers who are willing to support and help others manage issues that arise by taking the role of expert beyond the act of sharing their maternal experiences. The following online group interactions are just few of the examples illustrating how the borders of emotional, informational and material support are disappeared within the virtual boundaries of the group.

Posted on December 8th, 2019

Anonymous mom question:

“I need urgent affordable psychologist advices. Even though I am working, the economic power is completely in my husband's hands, my children and I are exposed to psychological and physical violence from him. I cannot stand it anymore.”

Member 1: “I am a clinical psychologist, if the mother can reach me, I would like to help voluntarily.”

Member 2: “As a lawyer, I can meet with her to support the mother in legal matters if needed.”

.....

Probably the following post of one of the members regarding breastmilk donation as an aspect of tangible support is one of the most impressive examples demonstrating the magnitude of the support structure existing virtually.

Posted on April 9th, 2018

Dear Sisters,

I want to donate my breastmilk because my daughter has an allergy. Is there an institution where I can donate?

Member: Hello, I am very troubled about this, if possible, I am a candidate.

AA as a virtual community of mothers has the capacity to offer its members various aspects of social support and choices in possible relationships which enrich their online experiences. Accordingly, most of the members I had a conversation with report a fulfillment of their needs of support in the context of motherhood and these women involved in the community were even more comfortable, satisfied with the virtual sisterhood and likely to get support from it than their real-life family and friends.

Berrin: “I lost my spouse in an accident a while ago and I shared on the platform a problem I had with my little daughter regarding our loss, on the platform. I mean, the support I received from the platform was really different. A lot of private messages came, everyone was united to find the same old pair of shoes that her father

bought for my daughter. My post had nothing to do with materiality, it was pure desperation of a mother. I mean, everyone somehow put themselves in my shoes and acted accordingly. I didn't even see this support from my closest friends. Because of that, part of me is filled with hope, part of me is full of disappointment.”

Berrin was actually one of the mothers I contacted for the theoretical sampling which I used to understand ambiguities in the experience of virtual support in different contexts. Although they seek virtual social support, those who is mothering in unordinary contexts demonstrates that their experiences of virtual support and motivation in participation the group are likely to be qualitatively different from the generality. The analysis revealed that some of these women gained strength from realizing that there are others going through drastic life experiences and struggles similar to theirs and find motivation in heroic rescues by supporting similar others. This is exactly where the virtual sisterhood transfers into the real-life world. Berrin and İzim who are the two members I had interviews with are two examples illustrating this transition. On the other hand, for many unordinary contexts, there is a sense that the dramatic life events such as loss of a child or spouse, or terminal illnesses transforms their personality and situations as mothers. It is possible to mention a feeling that these struggles come to elevate their status as mothers and they had a feeling that it sets them apart from the rest. Accordingly, their experience and expectations of virtual social support are transformed through their specific contexts of motherhood and community's meaning for them and the motivation in their participation can rather be explained by the concept of escapism. On that note, some of my participants offer insights on how the platform of AA perform in their unordinary life of motherhood, which are representative of the similar others.

Beyza: “I am sure that the exchange on this platform has a great contribution to the motherhood experience of many women. For an ordinary mother living a normal life, a happily married mother with a healthy child, yes, but I am the mother of a disabled

child with a terminal illness and I am out of the prototypical. Disability itself is something that turns a life upside down as a status. How can the posts about daily and ordinary motherhood issues apply to my life? People like me are just there for others with shared experiences, to feel like they are not alone and to encourage others who have had similar hurdles. Other than that, it's like a day-to-day break for me. I do not want to under estimate others` issues but I come home in the evening and read all the posts of the day and distance myself from my own mothering!"

Tülay: "For me, frankly, it's like watching a biography. A little more like getting out of my own life. It also gave me an incredible amount of time to put my own life aside and not see and hear him, not talk to him and deal with the motherhood issues of others on the platform."

Women's use and practices of this virtual space is specific to each individual woman; her context of motherhood experience, the personal matters she is dealing with and her broad frame of reference. However, the digital mundane harbors a range of relations, events and actions that shapes the virtual social life. The act of co-production of knowledge and our interaction with others as knowledge-based resources emerges as one of the most motivating factors for the mothers, which also gives this virtual women-only space that we inhabit it's one of its distinctive characteristics.

5.2.3. Experiential Knowledge: Alternative or Authoritative?

Trust is the building block for the success and thriving of this mediated world of motherhood, which highly depends on the community's ability to reemploy the practice of exchange the informal, first-hand knowledge of women against the professional narratives or mainstream. Based on previous categories of experience, it seems that being informed and updated about childcare information is more

important for today's mothers than ever before to be able to disambiguate and make a decision. Whereas the books and published source of expertise information have long been salient in the mothering knowledge of women, most of my research participants state that they view the types of information interactions they engaged both in their physical environment and online media as problematic and challenging for many different reasons. First, they currently tend to treat the source of information derived from the online search with skepticism because they believe that it yields the results of parenting websites or online pediatric information which are mostly featuring advertisements and they think that they are just commercial. In a similar vein, mommy blogging as an indispensable part of digital motherhood is neither viewed as an act contributing to women-to-women support nor a credible source of information by the participants. One of the primary reasons underlying this perspective is the thought that bloggers mostly construct factitious identities based on the idealized expectations of mothering, which goes parallel with the blog content displaying unrealistic, insincere and dishonest disclosure of mothering.

Berrin: "Of course, right now there is an online world and social media that has many answers to every question you ask. But how much this information corresponds to my actual experience is a matter of great debate. It is not possible for a woman to make sense of what she is experiencing as a mother by reading what motherhood means from mommy bloggers for example. The motherhood experienced and projected on screen is always perfect, but is fake as every one of us who really experience motherhood knows. Do you know what would be missing if we could not share our own experiences and read the experiences of others on this platform? Real motherhood! Sometimes the virtual can be more real than the real-life."

Based on my personal experience and the stories shared by the members, I may contend that the platform of AA is a bittersweet world in which we share not only our little victories, but our maternal failures we made a matter of life, feelings of

being overwhelmed by our care-giving roles and including the discussions on parenting and marital relationships. Sometimes we even share the concerns of our shapeless maternal bodies in the face of the enormous pressure created with the images that mostly evokes perfection.

Posted on December 16th, 2020

Anonymous mom question:

Dear mothers,

Especially after the second child, I no longer feel like an attractive and beautiful woman. I think that my role of motherhood and my husband's indifference is influential. My physical appearance has become a huge problem between me and my husband. I want to feel good and like a woman as before. Is there a therapy you can recommend?

Member 1: "Please remember that every one of us experiences this situation and it is normal for you to feel this way too. The burden given to women in this country and the cost of being a mother are buried in the society and culture we live in. We are always ready to have the cross to bear, bill ourselves for everything and pay by ourselves! I do not accept this, neither should you. Is there nothing your spouse has to do to make you feel like a woman? Please ask yourself who a father is?"

Member 2: "I think you need a space for yourself, not therapy for this situation. Let's lose weight, let's look at ourselves, let's go to sports and therapy, they're all ok, but let's do these for ourselves, not to meet the expectations of those around us. Men should first learn to value women as human beings and acknowledges a mother's labor! Where there is a woman who blooms, there is a man and a society who make

her at peace with herself. That's why you're not the person who should feel incomplete or ugly.”

In this respect, most of the research participants find this virtual space of dialogue they have created more comfortable, and safer to share their issues which they think are frequently dismissed and ignored in real life. Additionally, one of the significant factors inspiring the members in defining the community as a “real motherhood platform” is its ability to make way for the articulation of various aspects of motherhood which are otherwise left out the scope of the dominant narratives of the physical world. As hinted earlier in the previous part of the analysis, most of the women believe that they take a step in to the motherhood as inexperienced and unprepared regarding the difficult and various aspects of it and with what mothering would be like. Almost all the women I interviewed, especially those who have just taken a step into motherhood reported a contradiction between their experiences and imagination of motherhood, which they believe not only is the result of the misrepresentation of motherhood by formal information sources but because women themselves repress what they experience and are not honest each other about it. Based on my site observations, the findings suggest that the more experienced members` sharing practices are highly informed by the philosophy of honesty and openness to help others normalize their experiences and feelings of inadequacy, which has become a critical component of the differentiated nature of the group culture. Beyond the reciprocal or reactive sharing in response to the member`s posts, many of these women find a purpose in proactive using and sharing their own knowledge on various topics as they believe in the value of consulting others through truthful and open sharing.

The overall findings of the analysis highlight the unmanageable flow of messages regarding the contradictory standards of appropriate mothering derived from different source of information including medical establishments, traditional or

religious norms or contemporary patterns of motherhood on which popular media culture capitalized, as an important aspect of the information challenge today's mothers face. The reliability of practical knowledge of similar others and the significance of informational support received from peers is clearly evident in the current analysis and consistent across studies (Davis, 2015). However, what is more important is that those spaces not only become an important resource for women seeking for social support and experiential knowledge but also become a crucial communication tool to exercise a self-consciousness for women who are required to make complex negotiations within the informational terrain of contemporary motherhood. Like many others, for Berna, listening to other's stories and lived realities of mothering is essential in the process of women's adjustment of their expectations from themselves as mothers and accordingly revise their gendered labors downward to the plausible levels.

“Sometimes I wish I had been a member of this platform before I became a mother. Then my mind would be much more comfortable. Motherhood was a complete shock to me. No one ever told me I would experience such physical, mental, or biological difficulties. More precisely, society imposes something like you will continue your life happily after you become a mother, and this is one of the social pressures that instills in you the feeling of inadequacy after you become a mother, no one dares to reflect on her own unhappiness in the society. After becoming a member of the platform, I realized through the stories of thousands of women that we all go through more or less the same difficulties and have similar feelings.”

Researcher: *“What does this tell you?”*

Berna: *“Right now, for example, I can reach thousands of mothers through this platform and I see many different examples of motherhood. Of course, I look back and question myself. Each of us are good and bad in different areas of motherhood,*

and seeing this reminds me how we are different from each other as individuals, and the motherhood we do is unique to each individual. There is no single form or way of mothering. In fact, to put it simply, I have made peace with my sense of inadequacy.”

The embodied knowledge can also be thought of as a vehicle of change in the perception of the standards of maternal perfection including selflessness and sacrifice.

Ezgi: “I think we need a distinction between being a woman and being a mother, and related to that, some practices and ideas shared on the platform enabled me to recognize that some of us who already learned to live their lives independently from their child and that is so inspiring and encouraging. There are things I've seen in my own life that I haven't been able to achieve so far.”

Moving on the other side of this, my field observations that lasted for almost more than two years has led me to note that the knowledge produced and circulated during the online interactions of these women is huge. There is a strong sense that the women’s narration of their maternal-selves and experiences are primary recourse for others compared to formal information sharing referenced by mothers to a lesser extent. The production of various discourses of mothering and motherhood and narratives developed and added to the community repertoire through daily conversations of its members enables us to redefine what constitutes knowledge of motherhood/mothering within the virtual boundaries of the community, out of the control of the institutions of motherhood. This is not to reduce the argument in simplistic terms or suggest that this virtually created space is completely refined from the conventions of the physical world, but rather the argument here is that women’s circulation and consumption of the knowledge produced by themselves changes the way they think and know. What we define as community knowledge coincides with the reflexive recognition of the constructed nature of motherhood and the potential

of this virtual space hold for women to grant her authority over the knowledge which is her own. Similarly, predicating upon the Litts' arguments of medicalization of motherhood (2000), the process of women consulting each other by using their own experiences is interpreted by Drentea & Moren-Cross (2005) as women's "reclaiming of knowledge from the medical establishments" (p. 940). In addition to that, the conversation took place in the community of AA about the circumcision of boys (primarily in Turkey as a tradition that is difficult to overcome religiously and socially) is one of the examples that evidences the efficacy of women's knowledge and demonstrates that it is not only the medical power what their knowledge disrupts, but it is sometimes the traditional and religious authorities which play an important role in controlling the patterns of choice women makes as mothers. Those type of conversations produce what I call "the moments of click" in which online subjectivities are produced and enable us to make sense of our real experiences in relation to the cultural source of problems and prescribed expectations of societal structures. The moments of click release the textual production of creative thinking and development of critical orientations. We do that in the context of discovering other's narration of maternal selves. This powerful concept can be clearly captured by the following statements and online interactions of mothers:

Posted on June 4th, 2020

Dear sisters,

"As a mother of a boy, I have been evaluating the various type of information about circumcision for so long and my maternal instinct tells me that I need to stand against this kind of action. However, but as you all know, there is a lot of social and cultural pressure on us as mothers in this regard, and I find it difficult to make a decision like this because I am worried that my child will be discriminated against and ostracized from the society. That's why I ask for your experiences and opinions on this subject".

Member 1: "Obviously, if my son was black, I would not have a medical procedure done to whiten him so that he would not have social problems, similarly for circumcision, I did not interfere with my child's bodily integrity just because of environmental pressure."

Member 2: "We did not and will not have it done, we do not have a possession of our children, if we want to raise free, thoughtful but questioning children at every step, we must first set our own ideas free as mothers. I also think this is some kind of abuse."

Member 3: "We didn't and we won't. But you don't know how good it felt for me to see this post, it's very comforting to know that I am not a minority and alone."

Member 4: "We all have times and issues when we are and feel like a minority. The important thing is not to give up on our own truths as mothers. It takes struggle to overcome some of the patterned behaviors that are ingrained in us. First of all, we can strengthen our children against such discrimination by standing behind our own decisions."

Member 5: "First of all, I would like to thank for this post and all the mothers participated in this discussion. All of you give me hope for the future. It is very comforting to see that we are able to surpass the pre-conceived ideas, while it is important to even talk about such things. Had I known there were mothers like you, I would probably have acted very differently about my own decision."

On the other hand, comprehensiveness of the topics that are of interest to the mothers is an important factor in nurturing the community knowledge and enriching the informational support experience of these women. In terms of that *Araştırın Anneler*

affording large pool of audience with diverse range of maternal experiences, offers wide range and type of information experienced by the mothers compared to a community dedicated to a specific aspect of motherhood such as breastfeeding or vaccination. Therefore, the informational support received from this virtual space can also be framed as a community practice in good decision making for these women in the face of the fear of doing things wrong. Regarding their assigned position of primary care giver, findings highlight that the information they need in the context of their everyday mothering is more diverse than the main themes broken down by the previous studies (Nicholas & Marden, 1998). In this respect, this digitally-enabled space which allows the archiving and storage of the interactions and conversations, becomes sort of a response to the challenge of making sense of information mothers already have.

Berna: "We experience something new about motherhood every day that you don't know what to do. Whenever I don't know what to do with the information I come across, I always go back and ask the mothers of AA because people who have experienced similar things are always a more realistic and reliable source. In this sense, it makes it easier for me to make a decision."

This can be considered as a kind of fact checking and is the way of arriving to a decision within the maternal dilemmas. The findings of the previous studies echo this practice of women's constant comparison of previously acquired formal information with community knowledge and is interpreted by Hanson & Gibson (2013) as a practice of "informal consistency check" (p. 5) of women. Many of the mothers reporting that they feel safe to ask many questions that they perceived shameful, also emphasize the comfort of receiving answers to their questions without asking. Archiving enables mothers to return back and search for the relevant post as different issues came up and new mile stones attained. In sum the community knowledge, of which group conversations and postings are part, is considered to be a more powerful

and reliable tool than many other formal or online sources of information to make a proper judgment on the wide range of issues of mothering for these women.

Ízim: "Is the answer you're looking for not found in the parenting books or on the internet? But it is there on the platform of AA. Definitely more powerful than the Google engine. You know, experience is more important, you always look for the same example when you live something. It's a place where you're more likely to find that same sample because the group capacity is huge. There is also a lot of female interaction, and at that rate, there is both quantity and variety of information production. In that respect, it is the right resource for me."

5.2.4. Virtual affordances: Breaking the silence!

The first dimension of the study is dedicated substantially to examine how the mothers experience social support and articulate it with various aspect of their social lives of mothering. From several individual standpoints, the analysis demonstrates that the way mothers interact with each other hardly leaves space for a language in which a realistic view of mothering is created or maternal subjectivity or space can be captured. So, there was a strong sense of being alone in their physical crowd. The competitive and judgmental characteristics of physical social grounds working in tandem with the stereotypical expectations of the real world mothering is the primary factor that stopped these women asking for support and discourage them from engaging in truthful and intimate conversations with each other not only about the sufferings of maternal ambivalence or the negative sides of motherhood which are considered to be socially objectionable (Parker, 1995), but even many of the daily practices or ordinary topics. In parallel, the functionality of the virtual social support and whether or how women integrate its meanings and practices commensurate with at which level a safe and non-judgmental space the community open up for the members who are looking for the ways of evading the power relations of the real-life

interactions and reveal their true feelings. Inconsistent with this view, participants' description of their own experiences of the platform put forward these features as a significant factor differentiating it from the offline counterparts. By taking into consideration my autoethnographic accounts, I suggest that there is a cohesion between the sisterhood and the solidarity that exist in the virtual community of AA and traditional women gathering of past in which lived experiences and stories are shared. However, the findings suggest that the nature of social interactions influencing the virtual experience of support considerably depends on how the characteristics pertaining to digitally-enabled medium applied to the practices and flow of social life in the community setting.

At first, similar to its counterparts, AA as a woman-only space provides a virtual venue that is purportedly liberated from the restraining aspects of "masculinist public realm" (Madge & O'Connor, 2006 p. 208). On the other hand, weaker ties afforded by the mediated communication, well-established concept in the literature (Granovetter, 1973; Miyata, 2002; Wright, 2016), is tended to be perceived as an important factor promoting the candid interaction occurred on the platform. While the woman-dominated space allows for the discussion of feminine troubles in intimate details, receiving and providing more objective feedbacks can be considered as the benefits of weak ties that enables the emotional and social distance, all of which underpins the ability of the AA to create a safer place for more honest interaction and open exchange of the ideas and issues that might not be otherwise discussed within the immediate family or circles, but at a certain extent. AA is the virtual community where women can create their own source of privacy in public with almost 16,000 women, and in this respect demonstrates the differentiated nature of online social ties but it is not where we turn to complete anonymous others. While anonymity mostly considered as an inherent characteristic of the online communication, for the virtual community of AA it is not possible to speak of neither a truly anonymization of online identities nor an online pseudonym is allowed. As a gate-keeping measure,

mothers are requested to provide an identity information including names, age, city and the real images of themselves just as displayed in their own personal networks of Facebook and all of which are checked on by the admins of the group. Thus, the probability of someone creating fake images of an embodied persona is low. Furthermore, as there is no online advertisement of the community, people usually become aware of and join the group with the advice and reference of another member. For the very reason, sometimes the real social ties exist offline transfer into online by the mothers' inclusion of the others outside of the group for membership, and sometimes the reverse is true. This has two meanings for the group setting; first is that disembodiment considered as a means of emancipation (Plant, 2000) in online environments has been sort of challenged by the real identities, and the second is that while the large audience of mothers coming from different positions give the group its heterogeneity, contrary to what some studies (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005) have brought to the fore in their own cases within the scope of the weak ties discussions, the group of AA is not purified from prior acquaintances. On the one hand, the situation occasionally threatens the privacy of the group – I experienced this situation at first-hand when the research announcement I published in the group was shared with my ex-husband by a few women I did not personally know, but later learned that they were the spouses of my husband's friends. On the other hand, paradoxically, the fact that the sharing and comments are made by people with real identities increases the perception of reliability and safety.

Although the community of AA is not an anonymized one, it provides an opportunity for the members to anonymize their questions that may include strong critique or that they feel more comfortable to share without a name. What we call “Anonymous mother question” is one of the most effective tools facilitating the maternal disclosure and enabling the break of woman's silence in the community. My findings revealed the necessity that anonymity as one of the major concepts of online communication studies, needs to be analyzed when, in which context and what combination it is

valued in each different research field and particular case. In point of fact, anonymity is often remarked as of essential to free speech and open discourse in online communication; however, it also has a deficit of giving a way for verbal attacks and flaming of others as a result of not being physically present in online discussion (Consalvo, Ess & Wiley, 2011).

Going back to the setting under investigation in the light of these discussions, it seems more accurate to argue that *Araştırın Anneler* is one of the examples that manages to strike a balance between benefits and drawbacks by employing the anonymity in specific ways. To put it in a different way, on one hand the community affords members a space for free expression through the tool of “Anonymous mother question” and on the other hand, it obstructs the potential threats that may occur by making it mandatory that all comments and interactions on the anonymous mother question should be done with real identities.

Contemplating the relationship of voice, silence and gender in the context of motherhood calls into question the very meaning of maternal self-disclosure, and as a woman experiencing the motherhood in the same society as these women, I must say that, even among the closest circles, our culture hardly allows open conversation of your experience. In parallel, finding a social support becomes much more difficult, especially when the voices (in the meaning of sound and discourse) we want to make as mothers is uncommon, contradict with socially proscribed norms and culturally devalued. As one of the participant mothers Zehra, verbalizes: *“As a mother, do you think I can stand up and say such a thing that I cannot bear this burden anymore, that I shout at my child every day and I am overwhelmed by the guilt that this brings? No, we cannot! Because we need to be ashamed of the things we feel and because what you get from the society in this regard is not support, but judgment, that gets you deeper.”*

From this point forth, the combination of digitally-enabled tools employed by the community works quite effectively to phase the structures limiting women's ability of dialogue with others and herself out and contributes to the process of inclusion the voices to our discussions and narration of motherhood as in the following:

Posted on October 27th, 2020

Anonymous mother question:

"Dear AA,

If I briefly summarize my situation, I am the mother of two beautiful girls, the father is constantly busy with his own work at home. The feeling of inadequacy and the nervousness created by this feeling wear me out because of reasons such as not being able to keep up with my two children and not being able to devote enough time to them. I'm constantly shouting at my children and I'm hurting my conscience, but it's always too late. I have too much weight on my shoulders. I'm waiting for your suggestions."

Based on my observational data, the anonymous posts of mothers similar to the one above, which attracts the notice of the community, have a great importance in opening up a room for the catharsis and self-representation of others having similar situations and triggering the stream of voices with critical orientations toward societal expectations of motherhood and the socio-cultural structures.

All that does not mean that the virtual community sisterhood never fails or the interactions within these virtual boundaries are immune from flaming. Instances of failure I observed emphasized by some negative experiences of several participants leave no room for doubt to a darker side or a risk of hostile attacks of seldom some. At such times group rules (published on the platform and available to everyone) applied by the gatekeepers are significant to create a safe space and non-judgmental relationships these women are seeking. Trust is built over time as members' choice regarding the established rules of communication becomes consequential and people begins to feel safer to participate in open communication.

Ezgi: "I wrote a post to receive an advice about my child's English education. It started a quite unpleasant interaction among women, because a mother wrote to me something like 'correct your Turkish before you teach your child English' even though many of the mothers defended and supported me during the interaction. I also complained to the founders, and the next day, when I looked, I recognized that the comments were removed and few people were excluded from the membership by the gatekeepers. This is exactly why it is reputable, safe and trustworthy."

Eventually, the analysis demonstrates that the freedom of expression is facilitated by the particular use of anonymity that works in tandem with non-anonymous interaction and the various characteristics of the virtual setting mentioned above. In parallel, my observations lasting more than three years both as a member and a researcher made me realize how the limits of what we can share has expanded over time and the way we share has evolved into a more open and honest way and argue that the community's ability to create a non-judgmental arena inspires maternal disclosure, in turn fosters the reciprocity of philosophy of honesty. As one of my informants, Tülay, articulates: *"It helped me a lot to learn not to judge others and myself actually in my own experience."*

In other words, what I suggest is that the stories shared by anonymously and the related interactions of similar others “act as your real-self” fashion, contributes overtime to the de-stigmatization of the discussion of many topics that we would normally share with help of anonymous mother question facility or could never discuss within our physical circles. This is not to say nothing is off limits, but as of the point the online communication has reached today, we are in a position to discuss the various issues and experiences of our gendered and maternal lives including the psychological and psychical violence experienced by us or our child within so-called modern families, sexual abuse of our children by the relatives or a divorced woman’s issues about how to bring a new relationship into her life as a mother, all of which are considered to be hard-to share topics down in the label of educated, strong Turkish women. But on the other side, we can talk about the issues of a cheated, but we still can’t talk about the issues of woman who cheats.

Women’s way of use and appropriation of this virtual space, emerged from their shared needs and situations featuring real world motherhood, figures the decision to employ the combination of digital tools in one or another specific way, that is to say shapes the medium itself as a consequence. Concurrently, the flow of social life and the process of group socialization is significantly guided by the affordances of the digital space. Long term participation in this process creates the shared values beliefs and practices, and the online culture specific to this space we live in virtually. I had the chance to observe that mothers began to take collective responsibility over time for themselves to be able create the space they needed for each other. In relation to this “voices adjusting the tone” is a strong theme across the statements of one of the participant mothers, Tülin: *“In the outside world, women are definitely crueller to women. There is a visible effort online not to do each other what was done to us in our real life. There is an immediate adjustment to the tone of the discussion trough discourses such as no one has the right to criticize another's motherhood, and that everyone's motherhood is unique.”*

Sometimes it is the affordances of the medium that take center stage to regulate the audience in fitting the social life deemed necessary, and sometimes the audience adjusting the virtual space in a way to work best for them in relation to their real-life contexts. Within the constructivist-orientation of this study, the emerged analysis with a particular focus on everyday life offers an empirical way to underline the mutual shaping of media, technology and gender (Williams & Edge, 1996; Bijker, Hughes & Pinch, 2012).

6. THE SUBSTANTIVE GROUNDED THEORY OF EMPOWERMENT THROUGH VULNERABILITY

6.1 WHAT REALLY CONSTITUTES EMPOWERMENT?

In this dissertation study, the dimensions up to this point demonstrate the analysis of the two layers of experience of the mothers who are *Araştırın Anneler* community members. Motherhood is one of the essential categories of women's experience, and its practices and constructions are well conceptualized and established to be linked together with the feminist concerns of empowerment, inequalities and social justice by the studies acknowledging its contradictions and complexities from a range of theoretical perspectives (Ruddick, 1995; Rich, 1995; Hays, 1996; O'Reilly, 2010, 2016), and different contexts of women. However, rather than bringing the previously developed concepts into the analysis by assuming their relevancy to the lives of this particular group of women under investigation, woman's experience of motherhood was revisited in the context of this particular case. In this way, the appropriateness of extant theoretical ideas is assessed and included together with the developed concepts in the analysis of the first layer of experience. The first dimension demonstrates the analysis of a motherhood experience from the individual view of these women, how they experience their real-world lives as mothers, and their perception of social support exists offline. Accordingly, the second layer of the analysis examines the virtual support within a particular community context, not by extracting it from the broader and more complex experience of motherhood but in relation to the lives of this particular group of women as mothers. Finally, the last dimension of the analysis forecasts the consequences of the conceptual relationship of the first two dimensions and directly addresses the main research question: How does this virtual space of the community exert an influence on women's real sense of empowerment and transform their experience of motherhood in relation to the current

socio-cultural structure of it? For this very reason, this final layer constitutes the backbone of the substantive ground theory developed through the successive level of the analysis in this study. It explains how the intersectional sub-process of “Being a Mother” and the “Experience of Virtual Social Support” as they stand in the previous sections build on each other to account for “Empowerment” as a transactional consequence. The concept of vulnerability is presented by a critical lens and integrated into the substantive theory as a condition of the social interactions that make the process of empowerment possible. The following model integrates the intersecting sub-process of empowerment in the context of virtual community experience in relation to the conditions, consequences and actions.

Empowered mothering is substantially defined by its practices attributable to the concepts of “agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy, and advocacy” (O’Reilly, 2016, p. 71) within the framework of *Matricentric Feminism*. The fact remains that with its commitment to intersectionalism, the feminist maternal standpoint emphasizes the necessity to differentiate particular forms of motherhood /mothering based on the culture. This point of view, also informing the current analysis, implies that any of the concepts mentioned above as essential components of empowerment cannot be understood separate from the socio-cultural context of the mothers and the characteristics of the virtual location in which the complicated social collective realized. Socio-cultural practices and ideas of motherhood shape the experience of the motherhood of these women and, varied experiences of mothering give rise to the formation of different identities and practices, then results in “different levels of agency that negotiate, critique and resist patriarchal constraints in different ways” (p. 183). This perspective distinguishes between the different forms of motherhood specific to different cultures and their impact on what constitutes empowerment. It is as in the words of Collins (2002) in *Black Feminist Thought* “Every culture has a worldview that it uses to order and evaluate its own experiences” (p. 10). Keeping with this, the analysis captures the question of what constitutes empowerment for

these women within the specific context of the virtual community of AA through the following themes; *(Re)-learning to be a mother*, *Relief from power dynamics*, *Achieving a Self-Acceptance*. Each contains within itself a variety of practices and characteristics that can be attributed to one or more of the concepts of agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy as part of empowerment. Another important point that needs to be clarified is that these categories of the theorized experience are processual. Their boundaries with each other cannot be conveniently demarcated to be dealt with separately; instead, with their intertwined consequentiality, they do not propose one linear progressive process of empowerment.

In the light of the analysis, representations of mothers' online experiences and the way they use this virtual space in everyday living in relation to the social realities of motherhood results in a collection of sub-process, each blend with other to put into action a sense of empowerment for this particular group of women. As part of the certainly not universal but somewhat fluid definition of empowerment within the boundaries of the community, a sense of **Relief from power dynamics** is a crucial factor for these women to find the strength to push forward the boundaries of the discursive space of motherhood. It plays a crucial role in releasing the potential to disrupt the conspiracy of silence and the practices of various institutions of motherhood practices that takes place in the contemporary world where intensive mothering persists, in the medical establishments, tradition, religion and at home. It would be too simplistic to reduce the discussion to the argument that cyberspace is empowering or not. As Queen (2008) reminds us, there are always slippery grounds of the mediated world holds, and as with any online exchange, this virtual space of AA holds potential both for voicing and silencing or resisting and reinforcing. However, the findings make clear at this point of discussion that with the capacity of affording a non-judgmental space digitally and hosting a large pool of audience – homogenous by social-profiles but heterogeneous with maternal contexts – *Araştırın Anneler* provides opportunities for the intervention of voices coming from diverse

positionalities. The capacity to activate the presence of alternative voices pushes the march of maternal disclosure and influences the discourses exchanged during online interactions.

The first dimension considering the women's view of their lives as mothers casts light on the fact that the hegemonic meanings, expert-driven intensive practices and patriarchal power relationships of motherhood exist on an ongoing basis in today's contemporary motherhood. Since the mothers are the primary ones responsible for raising their children in the so-called neoliberal families, their efforts, abilities and competencies are hardly evaluated beyond the mothering practices they perform. Relation to the situation, the need for social acceptance emerged as an important theme in the analysis, is also theorized as a demand of maternal practice by Ruddick (1995), functions in tandem with the maternal guilt as the apparatus of society and makes it difficult for the mothers to bypass the socially accepted ways of doing and express an individual standpoint. However, the situation does not describe the social conditioning; but points out the ambivalence and inherent conflict women experience in motherhood. Rather, many participants generally exhibited an intention to differentiate themselves both from traditional stereotypes and contemporary culture's practices.

In contradistinction to the argument of the studies that online discourses reflect a continuum of real-life stereotypes of motherhood and patriarchal ideals (Hocks, 1999; Malina & Nutt, 2000; Josok, Lagesen & Sorensen, 2003; Madge & O'Connor, 2006), in this specific case of the networks of women, "the virtual" enables a public room where the members can venture into the discussions generating heterogeneous discourses of motherhood without the fear of reprisals. While this practice of the community relocates women beyond the moral and contemporary geographies of motherhood, it can hardly be described by a collective active resistance. Nevertheless, they do so in an uncharacteristically collectivist way by the sum of the

individual voices and practices of women from different positions. Thus, what is happening in this virtual space of AA can be defined as the breaking of consensus that has taken over their maternal experience in physical life, rather than arriving at a new consensus of being a mother or doing mothering that homogenizes particular identity categories or normalizes specific practices.

Based on my field observations of the online interactions for several years, I suggest that disclosure is another form of speech that occurs when a person does not feel obliged to control, hide or defend oneself. So, disclosure requires the ability to overcome the fear of disappointing authoritative voices shaping the narratives of our maternal experiences, which is facilitated through the relief the members experience from power dynamics within the boundaries of the community. Within this framework, women sometimes gained strength from disclosing their individual experiences hinge on their souls; and ideas and beliefs that no longer serve their lives. On the other hand, many of my participants state that they find relief in others' voices and practices that upset the widely accepted norms and practices of motherhood. Women gain reassurance from realizing that there are many others thinking and acting out of the box, which contributes to the feeling of not being alone and normalcy that is otherwise missing in the real-life context. This does not imply that women simply act on what they hear from others. However, each personal interaction with community knowledge in any form provides women with a reference point to compare their own mothering with and corresponds to the way they think about their mothering practices, self-concept, role and responsibilities, all of which provoke women to reflect on themselves. As a foundation for maternal thinking, this process of self-reflective activity is not specific to this particular virtual space but rather presents in mothers' real-world lives, as mentioned previously in the analysis. While our engagement in this process seems like an individualistic experience, our maternal thought is intertwined with the socio-cultural articulations of its imaginations. Locating fear of failure within the socio-cultural contexts of these women provides

us valuable insights into why this process of self-reflexive activity may not necessarily result in a transformative self for the mothers. As it is the case of the contemporary environment of motherhood in which power relations manifested themselves profoundly. In this regard, what brings these women and motivates them to stay together is the larger composition of knowledge and narration of motherhood co-produced through the self-defined stories and experiences, through which women can find their own way and reconcile internal conflicts as they move. In other words, engagement in polyvocality (both reflects the dominant and the alternative) help these women to capture and recognize others' subjectivity and render a more creative and critical process of reflectivity. Our engagement with the process provides an alternative way of questing our authentic voice that enables the development of critical consciousness toward the false voices shaping our life to act on them and transform, thuswise opening one's self to the other possibilities of being a mother. So once again, concepts of "advocacy" and "agency" are considered as the basis of empowered mothering are not traditionally evident in the daily practices of the community. I mean, the women of the community do not use their role of motherhood politically for social change or consciously subvert the current mandates and constructions of motherhood to make women empowered as mothers. However, agency and collectivism are the concepts being revised in this space to create the process defined as "breaking the consensus", which is reminiscent of one of the ways that Nathanson (2008) theorizes maternal activism, as "reframing motherhood, [by] expanding its boundaries (from private to public), and by endowing it with qualities normally attributed to the public realm" (p. 250). From the perspective of the mothers who participated in the study, experiential knowledge of other women who are present bodily in the online space is more influential than any rhetoric in inspiring their vision of motherhood.

Therefore, within its substantive theoretical framework of this study, when I speak of agency and the other concepts of the empowered mothering of *Matricentric*

Feminism, I do not mean that these women necessarily attain them in this space, but rather they understand that they should pursue and have them and this can only be enabled to occur with the help of others. Concurrently with hooks' (2014) discussion on the pedagogical practices in education and the importance of collaboration, sharing practices of members that are highly informed by the philosophy of honesty to help others normalize their experiences, or in other words, the authenticity in our dialogue with others confer women an agency in the production of knowledge and encourage each other to authorize their maternal experiences. So, the way these women forge a bond with critical self-consciousness passes through the participation in a discussion enabling generous and collaborative reflection. Because it is not always our voice where we explore the care of the soul, but sometimes our relief is revealed in hearing one another's voice during the collective listening and knowledge production. Such insight also has significant implications in the process of subjectification, which is defined by the theme of **(Re)-Learning to be a mother** within this framework.

It is clearly evident that the experiential knowledge received from the community becomes an important source that contributes to the information base of these women as "they work out how to mother" (Davis, 2015) and helps to make informed decisions by alleviating the uncertainty they feel about what is normal what is not, especially with the issues raise daily and practicalities of child care (Madge & O'Connor, 2006). On the other hand, in relation to learning how to be a mother complicated by the various overt or covert messages and socio-cultural expectations associated with bad or good performance of mothering, embodied knowledge touches these women in their negotiation of motherhood in a different way far beyond the support for the development of competence to fulfill their daily maternal duties. In terms of that, the current analysis highlights the virtual space as a continental shelf of woman expertise, where the individual stories and lived experiences manifested themselves against the mainstream and the embodied knowledge encounter with

medical knowledge (Johnson, 2015). Basically, the virtual space enabling access to the backstage of motherhood, with all its messiness and imperfection, helps us understand what “being a motherhood” really entails and to re-learn being a mother. In other words, it opens a room for the re-authorization of women in the betweenness of the traditional and the contemporary.

As against the gender assumptions of older generations, this virtual group of middle-upper class women coming from a context that at least enables them to access for educational, career and economic career independence opportunities, but ironically their experiences all show their role of primary care-giver after having a baby and clearly defines an integral part of the practices of patriarchal culture. The idea of intensive motherhood that child-rearing “should be centered on children’s needs, with methods that are informed by experts, labor intensive, and costly” (Hays, 1996 p. 21) is imposed on these women, forcing them to keep their modern, educated professional status in their practices of mothering. In other words, given the nature of contemporary motherhood, it gives rise to the belief that using their financial, temporal and intellectual resources is a prerequisite for good motherhood, similar to how hard work paves the way for them a college degree or a promising career. So, they set their goals of mothering according to unrealistic expectations that reflect their daily practices and experiences to diminish the joy of life and take away the sense of self-confidence and worth. The middle-upper class circumstances of these women make it difficult for them to enact their practices outside the margins, for example, expert instructions that control the exclusive ways of raising a healthy child, as an important aspect of intensive mothering. In response, this virtual space provides women with a more conducive and erratic realm of motherhood to extend their grasp of others’ subjectivities. In this gendered network, a woman who has a great sense of inadequacy and guilt about breastfeeding captures the lived experiences of the others who could not breastfeed or choose not to do so but can raise a developmentally healthy child and act on behalf of her children. The embodied knowledge of women

operating as counter-narratives on a variety of motherhood topics; weakens the destructive pressure of “have it all” (Ennis, 2014) aimed against us and closes the distance between knowing and unknowing. Therefore, **Re-learning to be a mother** is about becoming more flexible for the goals and expectations of themselves as mothers, by shattering the ideal of the good mother. This view can also be corroborated with the reporting of Mauthner (1999; 2002), suggesting that women who can modify their goals overtime during the reconciliation of inner maternal conflicts are those who are less likely to be depressed with the experience they live.

Thus “Re-learning” entails a woman’s examination of various aspects of motherhood with diverse voices of other subjectivities, the negotiations she makes within and between them to learn to trust in her instincts and different choices about how she wants to experience her motherhood, and then all of which become most cyclical process toward the development of a self they could accept. While it could be argued that this virtual space creating critical and creative thinking enhances personal maternal empowerment through developing a sense of self-confidence and self-worth by re-claiming part of the knowledge from the traditional norms and authoritative institutions, it also contributes to women’s ability to claim a maternal identity through the interrelated process of **Achieving self-acceptance**.

Situating the focus in the contemporary world, motherhood represents a category of gender identity with heightened achievement criteria that invoke perfection. A series of discourses including, medical, professional or traditional, which are inherently repressive, becomes a matter of struggle. The current analysis, which closely examined its implications both at the individual and social level, points to the struggle of these women with both self-conceptualization as mothers and how society identifies them. By drawing upon the idea of what Giddens, (1991) called the “project of self”, it is clear that the mothers experience the platform of AA as a site for making sense of their experiences and exploration of self through telling stories each other

and the related responses taking place during online interactions. Nonetheless, there is still a point that seems to disappear when we discuss the identity work in the context of whether, how or in which circumstances this identity work incorporated into the process of re-conceptualization of the maternal self or re-claiming a maternal identity within both online and real-life arenas. Based on the close scrutinization of the specific case of virtual social space in relation to the real-life experiences of mothers, this study suggests that the ability to establish trust, create a safe place and protect privacy defines the appropriateness of the venue for self-disclosure, giving it a public sphere proper, which helps women to achieve independence of mind. Thus, the characteristics of a public sphere, both online and offline, complicate the process of reconstructing a maternal self, based on the degree to which it allows context-free performances and “presentation of self in everyday life” (Goffman 1959; 1990). Within the outline of the maternal ecosystem of the physical world, these women who have to draw on more homogenous discourses of motherhood, which I call a “consensus”, could be seen as having a more patterned representation of self, less likely to construct both an authentic and autonomous identity. Therefore, it is possible to hypnotize whether the narration of motherhood produced and stories shared during the online interaction are emancipatory or repressive makes the difference in revising the accounts of the maternal self. In terms of that, recognizing the fact that it is unrealistic to consider the patterns of everyday life independently of the digital mundane, I suggest that, compared to the frequently inhabited spaces of our real lives as mothers, mediated communication occurred in the community of AA holds a potential to break the oppressive routine of these mothers and help users to transform their own understandings of maternal self and identity to a greater extent by accepting and approving her with what she can do or with which she felt herself to be a mother. So, this virtual venue created by women is shaped by our needs and also guides the way we interact with each other. In that sense, the digital mundane is where these women exercise their agency in the production of maternal thinking with no objective purpose concerning active advocacy. However, simply the purpose is

giving back the support received from here by helping others with similar experiences based on the philosophy of open sharing. Even though these women have similar social profiles, the community unites a diverse range of women, each challenged by motherhood in different ways; while some of us enjoy motherhood in a normative way, some are single by a divorce or a loss of a spouse. Others are adopting mothers and the ones challenged by the mothering of a child with handicaps. While some of us are trying to make a transition to new motherhood, others are challenged by a child's death before and after becoming a mother. Based on my ethnographic work, it should also be noted that women who come from unordinary contexts of motherhood or those experienced in motherhood with their second child are mostly the ones who have developed a sense of agency and do not have a need to stand by the dominant practices and narratives of motherhood, assert their voice but not be directly political. The encouragement of others received from these alternative voices points to the possibility that agency as a concept can be developed over time through long participation in online discussions.

Consequently, the variation in positionalities allows for a creative space in which the heterogeneous and contracting discourses releases the internalized binding constraints placed on the maternal identity. This kind of practice of self, positioning women in contradictory discourses, realize the diversity in motherhood and the peculiarity of standards associated with its performance and teach them to acknowledge each other's subjectivities. The feelings of being heard and accepted are then incorporated into a positive valuation of self, embracing one's own motherhood, which is defined as **Achieving self-acceptance** within this theoretical framework. Self-acceptance is highlighted as a significant process by the current analysis, that weakens the need of women for what Ruddick calls "social acceptance" (1995, p. 103) as mothers. In terms of that, it presents a potential for envisioning and realizing a maternal identity in her own right, a possible self that can confirm self-worth and confer women an "autonomy".

In sum, the substantive theoretical framework of this study suggests that women experience the intersectional spaces of virtual and the real world of motherhood as undergoing a process of an empowered sense of self which is constituted by relief from power dynamics – not playing it by an exterior rule book or cutting corners to (re)learn being a mother – knowing what to expect both from motherhood and of themselves, and the last, positive evaluation of self-toward the achieving of self-acceptance.

The need to challenge the ideology of motherhood has been substantially emphasized by feminist accounts of motherhood (Rich, 1995), and the empowerment of women as a mother is defined by *Matricentric Feminism* through a web of theoretical concepts including authority, autonomy and woman's equality in parenting. From this theoretical perspective, the process of resistance entails particular behaviors such as agency, advocacy and authenticity. With respect to this, in response to the question of “what is needed at both the individual and cultural level to empower women to engage in this process of resistance?” (O'Reilly, 2016, p. 68), *Matricentric Feminism* brings “unmasking of motherhood” forefront as a certain practice to theorize empowered mothering by drawing upon the argument of Maushart (2000), who contends that the biggest problem women face today is the mask of motherhood. To be masked is explained by Maushart as an “assemblage of fronts— mostly brave, serene, and all knowing—that we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experience” (p. 2). The concept of “unmasking” put forward in return is described as a woman's honest and truthful speaking to herself and others about messiness, chaotic and ambivalent site of her motherhood experience. In this way, in line with a determined purpose, which practices can encourage which behaviors, and their intended results are explained within this framework. Unmasking is considered to be a practice – exerting the authentic voice – that serves to help women develop a critical consciousness toward the structure of motherhood and encourage them to have an agency, autonomy, authority in engaging the process of resistance for

empowered mothering. All the same, *Matricentric Feminism* does have a point that seems to disappear, when under which conditions “unmasking” can or cannot occur or arise is discussed.

These women’s active negotiation to resolve their maternal conflicts presents a different picture in opposed to the position that considers motherhood is predestined by nature and deny and deprive women’s ability to think and problematize their situation. Many of my informants were aware that the existing ecosystem is deployed to encourage a certain type of mothering that detracts their lives in contrast with the view that these women are the passive victims of the ideology of motherhood. Then why is it still so hard for them to acknowledge their own suffering and put their consciousness into the words?

Motherhood is a minefield incorporating a plethora of choices in which women move through with varying degrees of consciousness, whereas the degree of awareness may be associated with the socio-economic composition of a group of women. However, as written accounts of participant experiences and my field observations testify, not so different from a woman who is considered to be underprivileged, this middle & upper class, highly educated women have quite a difficulty with managing and resisting the stereotypical expectations and patriarchal practices of motherhood ideology. Recycling back to the concept of “unmasking”, such an analysis opened up several important questions that should be answered: What is the risk of unmasking for a group of women or the costs of disclosure? And when and how does unmasking becomes a viable option for them in their passive resistance? These lead the analysis to address the tensions of vulnerability in the face of the various understanding of empowerment within the contemporary culture of mothering.

While interrogating the practice of unmasking by situating it in the social context of these women, we encounter a situation which is the inability of expressing true self

without feeling powerless. When the situation applied to the pre-given themes that have been thought of as women, *vulnerability* emerged as a problematic concept that is positioned against being strong or empowered, blocking women from remaining truthful in their actions and speaking. Its meanings and ramifications for the maternal selves necessitate us to establish a new understanding that allows for a novel course of action. In return, this study unpacks the meaning of vulnerability and comes up with alternative ways of perceiving it based on how these women experience virtual support differently from offline. Then, vulnerability is incorporated into the substantive grounded theory of the study as the key theoretical concept – a prerequisite of empowerment – that refines the current practices and concepts of the theoretical framework of empowered mothering.

Connately, pre-given meanings of being strong and empowered self and the ways they are transcribed into these women`s lives guide their practices and actions, which become their routine and make their situations and experiences seem less and less problematic. Indeed, one would expect that the social status of these women serves to downplay the role of the ideology of motherhood in their lives; however, the practices of intensive motherhood which is considered to be brought by the forces of neoliberalism (Nelson, 2010; Ennis, 2014), sophisticates their efforts to deal with the gender essentialism in real terms.

Most of these middle-upper class women are their own ventures or paid labor force, coming from a generation in which they are grown up to be as productive citizens, which is reflected in the achievement of their gendered labors. The strong independent perception of self and self-esteem which dominates their lives are receded with the exclusive female mothering. Rather than being an individual, along with the rise of intensive mothering, these women`s social positions have become more instrumental in improving their ability to rear their children in a more dependent, relational, technical and pedagogical way, which in turn serves to nurture

the gender essentialism of patriarchal motherhood. Thus, rather than marginalization of the particular group of women due to their so-called privileged social positions, the current analysis suggests that the way they live their lives as mothers is “the very antithesis of modern and emancipated feminist subjectivity” (O’Reilly, 2016, p. 207).

Ironically, these women are right up the ideology of intensive mothering not only as economic actors but with all their capacity to afford the instrumental, personal and intellectual resources required to accomplish good mothering. Therefore, the social circumstances of these women not only revive intensive motherhood that works in tandem with patriarchal constructions but also disguises it under “empowerment” (Fox, 2006). Within this framework, the concept of empowered-self entails a resilient subject who must invest all of her capacity to cope with the struggles to secure her family and child (Van Cleaf, 2018), is flexible enough to retool her mothering work according to the societal expectations to maintain the position of a good mother and is self-sufficient to achieve all, in defiance of herself. The way we manage our situation remains painful and reproduces the mode and practices of those who created it. (Butler, 1990).

Therefore, I suggest that this pre-given concept of “empowered self” operates as a narrative pivot in the sense of self of these women, in the manner “not touched by the capacity to be vulnerable” (Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2018). In investigating its contemporary effects, what we do expect these women to feel when they are trying to tell or listen to each other’s real experiences of motherhood in the face of such a paradoxical definition of empowerment? As a viable option, these women invest in relieving the maternal guilt and inadequacy and not to disappoint their socio-cultural positions and capacities, besides being a bad mother.

Consequently, in this particular case, empowered self as a resilient subject evoked by the contemporary mode of mothering entangled with the social class easily allows

the action of “unmasking” to produce a sense of vulnerability within its emphasized meanings associated with weakness, dependency and victimization (Cunniff Gilson, 2016), as well as powerlessness, deficiency, and passivity (Gilson, 2013).

For this very reason, we need a new language that marks a movement from vulnerability as a weakness to vulnerability as a site of agency and empowerment. With the meanings and use of the concept of vulnerability, we encounter problematic situations that prove its inefficiency in guiding the actions and practices of these mothers, which gives its questionable status.

“Vulnerability” has become a key concept not only within feminist theory and social sciences, but it is circulated across a diverse range of fields, including political philosophy (Goodin, 1985), sociology and social policy (Turner, 2006; McLaughlin, 2012), and the concept has taken a pretty long and complicated route from studies of sexual violence and victimization (Bergoffen, 2011) to feminist philosophy (Anderson, 2003; Butler, 2016), bioethics (Ten Have, 2016), and media studies (Knudsen & Stage, 2015). Drawing from the broader field of studies outlined, the language of vulnerability hardly represents a shared understanding and it seems to be still on the move. On the other hand, while the agency is debated as a concern of empowerment in gender studies and vulnerability has taken up a center of these discussions, the use of the concept associated with weakness, victimization, dependency and equation with woman referring to a feminized concept, all of which are considered to be the most critiqued features that makes it even more problematic and troubling for feminist theorizing (Koivunen et al., 2018; Cunniff Gilson, 2016; Gilson, 2013).

As a feminized concept, on the one hand with its connotation with weakness and dependency, unfortunately, holds potential for reinforcing gendered ideologies by implying the powerful position of men. On the other hand, the discussion over which

criteria should be applied and whom should be conceived as vulnerable for a response with care helps us to understand that vulnerability as it stands claims suffering to a particular group of women and hereby reproduce inequality among women by locating a woman as privileged or vice versa in the presence of another woman. The form in which the notion terminates one's capacity and possibility to be vulnerable easily makes way for the sufferings of the particular groups to remain silent and uncontested, so it indicates another kind of marginalization. In parallel with this perspective, based on real-life stories of the women of AA, including mine, I argue that suffering, injury or oppression that are rooted in the set of motherhood ideologies are not exclusive to a particular social class; they rather apply to all women in different ways according to their positions in time, space and society.

Recognizing the double-edged nature of the vulnerability, in other words, the issue of those vulnerable against some but in power against others, what is suggested does not mean complete equality, or to quote Judith Butler (2016) "an existential condition" (p. 25) that sparks an ignorance of uneven distribution of exposure of self to suffering, oppression or violence. It is rather about allowing each other to use our capacity to be vulnerable (which we all have) to one another by acknowledging each other's suffering and subjectivity, then responding with care.

Mapping out the taken for granted meanings of vulnerability and examining its contemporary effects makes it more accurate to suggest that rendering "unmasking" within and beyond the maternal context is one of the most considerable hardships of feminist imagination of empowerment. It is especially within a social world in which the institutional model of "empowered self" creates the conceptual *ideal of invulnerability* (Gilson, 2013) and shapes austerity as a way one responds to it. So how a society perceives the meaning of vulnerability matters because it distinguishes between how we handle and ought to handle our issues of being and doing as women.

With respect to this, while this study tracing various ways the virtual entangled with the real at the level of everyday life, the intersection of two opens up an interactional experience of motherhood in which the substantive grounded theory emerged from and captures the empowered self, not through a resilient subject but the vulnerability that is no longer about powerlessness, weakness, victimization, deficiency or passivity but more about acceptance, acknowledgement and agency.

Based on my analysis, within the constellations of social circumstances of these women avoiding disclosure, lack of authenticity, or, let's say it "masking" coincides with the fear of judgement and weakness. Due to the lack of control over the information of personal experience or emotions, it reinvokes the destructive feelings of inadequacy, guilt and deficiency in the absence of social and emotional support. In response to that, the taken for the grandness of everyday life of mothering disrupted by the vulnerability that is emerged from empathy developed from a sense of connectedness through embodied experiences and acknowledgement of each other's related sufferings and positions, and not definitely from induction of shame by judgmental responses of similar others within the boundaries of this virtual space. Women's description of relief and a sense of empowerment implies a state of mind or a human condition that is not needing to pretend or stay strong to conceal the distress, mistakes or suffering from the experience of motherhood as a woman. In this respect, the mediated motherhood of this particular case, holds an embodied promise of vulnerability that would be removed to be a self-depreciation and would instead comprise a basis for an uncharacterizable way of collectivism, might be even better to say it a mode of solidarity. Basically, I suggest that when the self-reflexive activity is generous and collaborative, it enables a kind of vulnerability that becomes a source of critical maternal thinking and forges a bond with the issue of mothering through precarity.

Vulnerability, as re-conceptualized within this study's framework of substantive grounded theory, is a human condition in which one consciously chooses to remain powerless rather than risk avoidance. Vulnerability inspired by the reciprocity of sharing is about being committed to getting the acceptance, understanding and encouragement one needs from others. It is a state of mind that has nothing to defend and tells us to get rid of the masks and gears that hurt our experiences, bodies and souls. In conclusion, this grounded theory study contextualizes empowered self as a vulnerable subject with competence to accept and express a true self without a feeling of weakness, victimization and deficiency.

It provides another possibility of gender position that can untangle the foundations of various ideologies of motherhood without being subjected to indifference and social shame. This framework considers a particular way of theorizing empowerment which is realized first through vulnerability before resistance. In keeping with the argument of Butler (2016) against the mutual oppositional of vulnerability and resistance, the envision of agency as drawing from vulnerability as a resource of empowered mothering enables it to become the part of practice of resistance.

In parallel to the feminist perspective on maternal activism in world politics (Ruddick, S. 1995, Collins, 2005; Neyer & Bernardi, 2011; O'Reilly, 2016) that considers motherhood as a site of activism and a source of empowerment, the literature in Turkey examines motherhood as a form of political agency with references to particular groups such as the *Saturday Mothers*, *the Mothers of Soldiers*, the *Peace Mothers* and the *Mothers of Martyrs* by locating their movements in the maternal activism in world politics and feminism. (Orhan, 2008; Gedik, 2013; Karaman, 2016; Karaman, 2020). In every sense, feminist encounters with maternal activism reflect polarized views of evaluating the motherhood identity as part of feminism and an ongoing debate of under what conditions of mothers' practices could be classified as activism or feminist movement for a transformation. Within

this context, the revised meaning of vulnerability provides an alternative to the outlined framework of the concept and holds potential to spark new ideas about the possibility of a gendered position outside one invokes maternal activism.

It should be noted the degree and what constitutes empowerment may be entangled with socio-economic composition or a social class of a group of women. Though the re-conceptualization of vulnerability has emerged from a particular social constellation of *Araştıran Anneler* and the question of vulnerability is limited a substantive field of investigation, these questions should be asked around the discussion of various women coming from different social profiles, positions in time and space within and beyond the context of women who are mothers. Because all of us can use our capacity to be vulnerable – in fact, all of us really are vulnerable against different forms of inequality and oppression – at varying degrees to be empowered as long as it is permitted by our social spaces, either online or offline.

CONCLUSION

The past couple of years mark a period of several milestones and transitions in my personal journey as a woman and a mother, beginning concurrently with a marital dissolution and my PhD studies. I was trying to make a challenging transition to my new identity as a single mother. I joined an online support group of mothers on Facebook -*Araştırın Anneler*- with a friend's reference in order to pursue my own cause through the stories of others who have walked a similar path, which I believe would not have been available otherwise. So, my research had already begun at the point where I became involved in the community culture of mothers while listening to the stories of others as an engaged observer of online interactions. Realizing the common patterns of motherhood experience and (un)spoken elements of everyday mothering, concerning the relationship between structure and interaction as interrelated aspects of the motherhood we experience today, concurs with my interest in discovering how and to what extent this group of women experience motherhood differently at the crossroads of online and offline. The second issue that is encompassed by this dissertation relates to the consequences derived in the intersectional areas that made up the social world of motherhood from the former question on the relationship of structures, the form of social interactions and actions of actors as the subjects of the study. This is exactly where this study questions the potential of the virtual space of women in enabling its actors to disrupt the institutional power of motherhood. This is done by re-interpreting motherhood and enacting identities and practices outside the bounding criteria, thus transforming the way women experience their motherhood in the context of broader social configurations.

Online support networks offer a productive ground for re-asking the question of the mother at the intersection of digital media technologies and gender. It also provides an effective way to think through the manner in which the actors, existing and

immediate structures and interactions are interplayed to produce the actions and processes that either reinforce or re-shape the older social structures. However, the way motherhood is conceptualized as a personal issue or affair remains problematic (Ross, 2016) and is similarly reflected in how the notion of the virtual community of support is studied in the context of motherhood as detailed in previous sections (See in chapter 2). In an effort to understand how motherhood is contextualized and operationalized for the existing research of virtual community of support, I argue that various aspects of motherhood as a political category and a socio-cultural construct are being left unexamined and the complexity of the experience derived from the interaction of virtual and real structures is absent from contemporary discussions. In this manner, the micro position focusing on the actions taking place within the virtual networks of mothers brings along the risk of losing the broader social configurations in the emergent milieu. In the opposite direction, a macro view that the characteristics of the traditional structure are brought into the online environment may lead to a risk of what Hildenbrand (2007) calls “freezing actions in structures” (p. 540), which tends to deny the ability of social actors to think and reproduce the conditions in where interactions make a transformation possible. In between these positions, this dissertation adopts the philosophical and methodological foundations of the constructivist grounded theory, which rejects the idea that social structures are given. This view makes it possible to develop a grounded theory of this substantive area from the collected data. The position that recognizes the dialectic of social structure and interactions from transformations evolved, underpins the way this study theorizes the interactional process of virtual and real structures of motherhood as well as how the actors experience it. Accordingly, in the light of the structural issues of contemporary motherhood, the experience of the virtual community of support is re-framed in terms of social justice and gender inequality from the maternal feminist standpoint perspective for a complete discussion. In terms of that, the feminist perspective is an important consideration that bridges the methods and methodology in which they are applied and operationalized.

The research design, combining the digital ethnography with sequential in-depth interviews, is principally to provide a space for women to “speak for themselves” (Chase, 2005, p. 666); thus, it puts emphasis on the value of voice and various subjectivities of women, who are the narrators of themselves. The ethnographic fieldwork, involving my long-term presence with the participants in the online setting, allowed me to open myself to analysis, resulting in a broader reflection of the experience. Although the platform of *Araştırma Anneler* is presented to be the empirical locale of this study as a selected case where the research is mainly conducted, in parallel with the notion of connective ethnography (Hine, 2007), in-depth sequential interviews in combination with participant observation played an important role in the construction of the field as to integrate the two social grounds of motherhood. In this way, this methodological choice addresses the limitations of single-sided data analysis and attends to the need to move toward the why and the how.

In this case, the virtual structure of women-only spaces is considered as a testing ground and resource for mothers that can make a gender position possible for change and transformation with the recognition of women’s agency. On the argument that the emergent milieu can only be conceived of in relation to the current structure of motherhood, this study adopts a multi-dimensional perspective to the analysis in which the experience of the virtual community gets involved in the analysis after the debate into the real-life structures of motherhood, in complex ways. The concepts of each dimension explored in detail in previous sections are interrelated in examining the interactional processes at the intersection of the online and the offline. Toward the end of the analysis, the spiralling consequences of these interactions are identified as *(Re)-Learning to be a mother*, *Relief from power dynamics*, *Achieving self-acceptance* – which are built on each other to account for evolving and ongoing process of empowerment. While empowerment, as the hearth of the analysis,

becomes the main event within which interactional processes are manifested, the final level is where the trajectory and the conditions come into play for the consequences mentioned above, and the event of empowerment that they constitute become realized. By tapping into all levels of the analysis in coherence with the process of empowerment in an effort to identify the conditions related to the consequences, social interactions and action, vulnerability emerged as an important and, at the same time problematic concept that makes the difference between action and inaction depending on the women's perception of it. The critical appraisal of the literature sheds light on the fact that the concept of vulnerability within its meanings is highly associated with powerlessness, weakness and victimization, which is positioned against being strong and empowered. Based on the argument that such a conception of vulnerability blocks women's potential in their actions and expression of self, new ways of perception is developed and vulnerability is reconceptualized and incorporated into the substantive theory of the study as a condition of the above consequences and the process of empowerment. Vulnerability shapes at the intersection of the social worlds under investigation over the course of time. It affects the potentiality of social interactions to generate the various aspects that constitute the process of empowerment, resulting in further interactions.

As a result, the virtual and real worlds of motherhood are analyzed respectively in their connection with each other, which made it possible to overcome the binaries of online and offline life of mothers and think beyond the emergent space of motherhood to larger -social reality. For this very reason, the central location of this study is neither the community space nor the real world of mothers but rather the arena that take form within and between two. The substantive theory developed through this dissertation relates to this cyclical and evolving process of empowerment, the conditions that make it possible, and the consequential categories that constitute it, as a whole, represents the main outcomes that elucidate women's experience of motherhood at the crossroads of the virtual and the real.

The ecosystem of motherhood is a complex world that women who are being and becoming a mother inhabit in contemporary societies and is a process that marks the whole of social, cultural, political and economic spaces in which motherhood itself is born into. This dissertation, focusing on the ways approaching motherhood politically and culturally, addresses women's thoughts on how, as a woman, they experience their motherhood within the current system by drawing attention to the available social support from various social relationships. Unlike most previous research considering new mothers as cohorts, this study opens up a space for as many different mothers' voices as possible. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that, regardless of whether she is single or partnered, a stay-at-home or working, an adoptive or biological mother, a woman, after becoming a mother, finds herself more or less submerged within the borders of the contemporary puzzle of motherhood ecosystem.

Although the group profile diversifies with different motherhood forms and experiences, the participants by majority were middle/upper class, highly educated women. They adopted a dual-earner nuclear family configuration, which can be considered as reformist based on the idea of gender equality, and which inspires a view of shared parenting while framing fathering with his active participation in household and parenting. But, thanks to the persistent ideology of intensive motherhood, the contemporary women subjectivity, a strong sense of self-esteem and the independent perception of self that these women imagine bringing their marriage is fragmented once they become a mother by the old, gendered expectations passed down to the neoliberal nuclear family. So, the way a group of mothers experience their lives; demonstrates the fact that the assigned responsibility of childcare and domestic labor applies to all women regardless of social class.

For the women, processing the responsibility of childcare highly involves the continuous act of overcoming uncertainty, self-doubt and feeling of inadequacy

through information-seeking, no matter where they are in their motherhood journey. However, the information experience of women has been realized within the complex web of social relations, and the informational terrain of motherhood and the social conditions of motherhood complicates the woman's efforts of making sense of her experience and self as a mother. These scripts of how to process mothering continue to thrust women into a particular type of motherhood and become a source of coercion for them. On the other hand, the experiential knowledge of other mothers with similar experiences becomes a highly valued source of emotional and informational support; however, the idealization of motherhood by various ideologies promotes a hierarchy of women based on motherhood that pits women against another and limits women's behavior to rely one another for support in the maternal social world. In line with the feminist criticism of contemporary motherhood ideologies, the maternal shame deriving from the perception of failure becomes a social power driving not only the attitudes of women towards help-seeking but also the silence in the form of misrepresentation of the experienced reality. The social shame and fear of being judged retain them to formulate and disclose oppositional narratives of their experience, practices or identities beyond the consensus of motherhood realized in the material spaces of the ecosystem. Thus, the process of self-reflexive activity through engagement with others hardly leaves space for creative thinking and results in a transformative self for the mothers.

It should be re-emphasized that these women are not the passive victims of the social conditions or the ideologies, but rather they exhibit a great sophistication in dealing with those in an ongoing negotiation process that includes the negotiation of identity, meaning and practices of motherhood. The social class and the economic condition of these women intersect with the attitudes and practices of those deemed capable of appropriate mothering by the current intensive mothering scripts that require an investment of a considerable amount of money and a level of intelligence. On the one hand, they reject the hegemonic practices and the gendered roles and relations of

parenting; on the other hand, they play upon the empowered subject position imposed on them by the ideology of intensive motherhood as a way of compensating the feelings of maternal guilt and inadequacy. While this binary hardly gives room for women who seek to envision motherhood and implement an identity in their own right, the maternal ecosystem challenges women to question their assumptions of motherhood. This is exactly where the online community of AA comes into play as an alternative space that provides an outlet for these women to express themselves, receive and provide support. The fact that virtual communities have become alternative arenas for women seeking social support cannot be reduced to personal reasons of motherhood, but is indicative of the structural source of problems. By analyzing how the experience of virtual social support articulates with the various aspects of everyday life of mothers and the social relations of mothering, this dissertation has shown that women have a more complex understanding of what it means to receive and provide virtual social support in the context of motherhood, than to be explained only by the information needs of new mothers. So, the investigations of the dissertation underscore the need for future studies that goes beyond the social capital approach and the questions of whether online interaction detracts from real-life forms or enriches the core values of real-life social relations and contributes to the discussion of motherhood intersected with media and communication technologies.

The experience of the virtual social support community of mothers shows characteristics between private and public, individual and collective, and it is social but constantly evolving. The participation in the virtual community of mothers with a large number of similar others with similar experiences provides women with a safe, feminine zone to negotiate motherhood by allowing relief from power dynamics within a time and space of the community. While the community space is private to women, it can be concluded that it is more public to the extent that a range of topics otherwise cannot be easily shared becomes available for the investigation and

discussion of mothers. The ability to protect privacy defines the appropriateness of the venue for self-disclosure, and the safety of the group is defined by non-judgmental communication, all of which are facilitated through the true combination of tools and affordances (see in chapter 5) that circulated by the digital. It may also be remarked that the women themselves are central in shaping the medium according to their needs over time. Sense of relief from power dynamics is a crucial factor that releases the potential of breaking the silence and pushing forward the boundaries of maternal discourse. Women provide and receive support by using their own experiences is a powerful notion in itself because it grants agency and authority for women to create and define the knowledge of motherhood as an alternative to authoritative mainstream information. Even though the group is homogenous by social profiles, variation in personal maternal contexts generates a reflexive activity in which the contrasting discourse allows for creative maternal thinking. Polyvocality of meanings helps women normalize their feelings, provides new ways of knowing that helps them to re-learn what motherhood really entails, and enables them to transcend both the need for acceptance by others and for being an ideal mother. In sum, the supportive, non-judgmental arena of the online community makes available real examples that can demolish the myth of motherhood with their practices and identities, and in this way, allows women to accept themselves as mothers they would like to be. In this regard, achieving self-acceptance has implications for the process of subjectification and a possible maternal self that confer women autonomy.

In short, this study concludes that motherhood has temporarily stopped being a personal issue in the community conversations and came to a point where it can be understood as a problem embedded in social conditions and practices within the context of Turkish culture. The community opens up a room for the women to develop critical orientations and produce counter-narratives of motherhood by drawing on each other. In this sense, the experience of women shows collective characteristics. However, we must be cautious whether or to what extent women

transgress the invisible borders of motherhood varies with their level of consciousness. The findings indicate that the negotiation process of women with motherhood occurs at the individual level, so the process of empowerment theorized by this study may not necessarily involve the resistance or translate into a transformative self for an individual woman.

Even though it is observed that cycling consequences of the meaning-making process of the women are redounded and integrated into the online conversations of women inside the community, there is still a lack of evidence whether the personal articulations of online gets beyond the borders of virtual space of community and contributes to the discussions of motherhood and functions to shape their practices in their material world and influence the understanding of motherhood in the broader culture. The absence of this point from the discussion of this study represents an opportunity for further exploration for future studies that may consider integrating physical environments of women into the fieldwork of digital ethnographic study. What happens here may not cross the boundaries of the community; however, it is still significant because it constitutes a cultural practice of its own right against the existing structure of motherhood.

Additionally, *Araştırın Anneler* is a woman-only space where women co-produce knowledge and occupy positions of authority without the existence of men. The interaction in these feminine arenas that allow women's socialization is considered as backstage and more honest (Goffman, 1959). In a similar vein, the characteristic of the space takes part in the women's perception of safety in the case of AA, and it contributes to the philosophy of honesty they established over time with each other. This may influence the overall process of empowerment depicted in this study. An investigation of a more heterogeneous social support space where fathers and mothers participate in online discussions would provide insight into how the process

may differ by enabling a comparison. Exploring these differences, again, provides an opportunity for further exploration.

This study provides an understanding of what constitutes the process of empowerment for a particular group of women in Turkey. Although the commonalities and differences of women that compose the community of AA is discussed in terms of their influences in the field setting and online interactions, the composition of the selected case brings both opportunities and limitations based on the demarcated nature of experience and interactions analyzed by this study. The themes of empowerment which have been detailed in the previous sections (See in chapter 6) does not amount to the development of an empowered self in the aggregate. However, they seem to constitute the interrelated processes and practices attributable to the elements of empowered motherhood. Recognizing the commonality of social profiles of the participants, there is no claim that they can be applied to all women, but those are the different aspects of sense of empowerment on which the women draw on to various extents. Gender ideologies in which motherhood is an important part, vary considerably according to the position of women in time and space or class and region, to the extent Kandiyoti (1988) argues that women face patriarchal ideologies in different forms with a distinct set of rules pertaining to them, which call for different strategies of women for resistance. In parallel, it should be admitted that the experience may differ by the setting composed of women from different socioeconomic classes, backgrounds, political orientations, ages and cultures. Further, the process of empowerment is aligned with the sense-making of the women, which involves their reactive responses to the milieu that is constantly shaped by interwoven interactions, experiences and contexts, so it needs to be considered in a social and historical context.

When judged by the reliability, generalization can be considered problematic for qualitative studies, especially for those similar to this thesis focusing on one specific

case over a lengthy period of time. Rather than obtaining a statistically representative sample or typicality, as a qualitative researcher, my concern lies in selecting research sites and participants relevant to the theoretical focus of this study. Within the grounded theory framework, this study employs a theoretical sampling method in which the case is strategically selected based on the representativeness of concepts. There is no attempt to generalize the case of *Araştırın Anneler* to populations here, but the focus is on its generalizability to the theoretical proposition represented in the study. In parallel, this study capturing the nuances of gender network experience and its influences within a specific culture of motherhood realized in a particular setting strongly emphasizes the contextual approach to the knowledge. The analysis of what constitutes empowerment for a particular group of women and how it can be used highlights the need to legitimize subjective knowledge in our research. Thus, the voices of a group of women taken together with others contribute the depth of what may constitute empowerment in various contexts, which makes it possible to consider it as part of a whole in practice. On the other hand, establishing relationships of existent concepts with the interpretations that emerged from particular contexts suggest new areas to delve into and directions for the development of theory.

The negotiation process of the mothers defines the everyday life of motherhood, whereas; the boundaries of the ecosystem set limits to the factors that ease the negotiation and transformation; however, these do not need to be necessarily prescriptive. As researchers, pre-given concepts and the actions of actors with which they are associated “tend to bias our interpretations, so that confirmatory evidence is accepted without reflection” (Dey, 2007, p.175). In this respect, grounded theory informed by constructionism provides with this study an effective methodology for creative deliberation in the studied phenomenon and to come up with new ways of seeing and generating new concepts or definitions that can unsettle the taken-for-grantedness of social worlds.

The findings of this study providing empirical support for the problematic perception of vulnerability is an addition to the previous calls (Gilson, ,2013; Butler, 2016; Cunniff Gilson, 2016; Koivunen, et al., 2018) for the need of scrutiny on how we re-conceptualize and use it in feminist research. But more importantly, by providing a basis for the re-conceptualization of the concept, this dissertation further contributes to the wider discussion on the new ways of perceiving and use of the concept of vulnerability across various areas of research.

This study makes it clear that a concept cannot be had without the other that is positioned against it. Vulnerability with its connotations of weakness and victimization co-exists with its opposite meanings of being powerful and strong. So, in the light of the already difficult to answer questions of whom should be conceived vulnerable, the concept as it stands results in the silence of particular groups and their sufferings remaining uncontested. In this context, coming up with new ways of seeing vulnerability, this study alters the perception of the concept in a way to reframe it for action, thus and so addressing the pragmatic constraints of the concept.

Vulnerability in the particular context of motherhood did provide insight into its ability to integrate with extant concepts and theoretical framework of women's empowerment as mothers. Rather than a resilient subject, the substantive theory of this study captures empowered self through a subject with competence to use her capacity to be vulnerable. A new language shaped and co-constructed by the researcher and participants of this study marks a movement from vulnerability as a weakness to vulnerability as a site of agency and empowerment, which refines the existing theoretical framework of empowered motherhood.

The fact that the concept of vulnerability is objectified by women who act in a certain way within the boundaries of the AA community creates a new course of action that others can apply with similar situations. However, the necessity of new concepts

evolved from the similar social circumstances of a particular group of women with common social class, all women from different backgrounds can draw on such an understanding of vulnerability for different discursive acts and practices in their own way, which become together to form a whole for new patterns of movement.

The conceptual framework developed throughout this dissertation provides a foundation for re-examining the process of empowerment in different contexts beyond the group of Turkish mothers who can be considered socially advantaged. It is still important to note that the theory of empowerment through vulnerability makes no claim to being formal. It is substantive and holds the status of hypothesis. Nevertheless, it shapes the frame for action by systematically relating the social interaction to a range of potential consequences and conditions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and provides a testing ground for future studies in the intercultural and comparative field within and beyond the context of maternal subjects.

As another important point of discussion in this study, the concept of agency is considered problematic by the perspective of *Matricentric Feminism* (O'Reilly, 2016) on the argument that mothers are accorded agency on behalf of children, not themselves to effect social change. This dissertation, situating the concept of agency in the context of maternal subjectivity, concludes that AA provides a space where women occupy agency not only in the generation of knowledge but in the decision of what constitutes the knowledge of motherhood which reflects a range of practices, family formations and identities with the potential of upsetting the hegemonic meaning and stereotypes of motherhood. So, agency manifests itself in the ability of women to influence each other through the narrations of real experiences and encourage each other to seek to attain authorization of their own experience. The ability to respond with acknowledgement and care to one's ability to use her capacity to be vulnerable allow the women in this virtual space to meet many different forms of motherhood, and in this way, transformative practices and identity of motherhood

become more applicable for women. Women's depictions of various contradictions of lived experiences and the institutional representations of motherhood of one another allow them to understand that they should seek to attain authorization, authority and autonomy for change.

In parallel to the feminist perspective on maternal activism in world politics, scholarly discussions in Turkey (See in chapter 6) focus on motherhood identity as a site of political activism and the feminist movement, which allow a little analytic space for the readings of motherhood as an ambivalent site of agency, empowerment and resistance which might derive just from the sharing of personal experiences without a radical political or feminist intention.

Neither the definition of women's agency that invokes political activism and nor the use of maternal positions to lobby for a social change is evident in the community practices of *Araştırın Anneler*. Consciousness does not simply emerge from the traditional collectivist interdependencies that serve to resist the ideologies of motherhood. However, these women still do so in an uncharacteristically collectivist way with the sum of each individual voice raised in the community and by not producing a new consensus on what motherhood means but instead breaking the consensus. Any suppressive system cannot be expected to a breakdown in the short run. The results put forward by this study are also parallel to what Kandiyoti (1988) explains at the social level as passive resistance and have a potential in the form of pixels to affect women's movement for change in Turkey.

Envision of an agency that draws from the concept of vulnerability as a condition of empowered mothering enables the concept to become a part of the practice of resistance. The revised concept of vulnerability holds the potential to spark new ideas about the possible gendered position which is derived outside of a particular form of politics such as collective movements, lobbying, advocacy or activism and might

open up a space for the alternative reading of maternal identity as an agency in the feminist research and contributes to the theorizing of empowerment and resistance.

Finally, in a methodological sense, this dissertation's decision to combine digital ethnography with sequential in-depth interviews within a feminist constructivist grounded theory makes a contribution and aims to hopefully inspire the research design of future studies in the field of communication. Grounded theory contesting the deductive logic is a quite efficient methodology in fostering to see the studied social world in fresh ways and moving qualitative research to an explanatory theoretical framework. However, as the data collection and analysis process take a long time and is quite laborious, it is often preferred as a method for analysis, rather than a methodology or a practice of theorizing, which I must admit was challenging as well as it is an educatory experience for me. I hope; this study that employed reflexivity into the whole research process, especially for decisions made regarding the research execution, will guide new researchers in terms of exemplifying grounded theory.

To conclude, let me return to the question that speaks to the feminist concerns contiguous digital media & technologies: Do feminine virtual spaces improve or restrain women's empowerment capacities? Even though utopian and dystopian evaluations of gender and cyberspace are not new, based on my investigations, it is now clearer to argue that the question of whether it is empowering or oppressing for women has no clear map or destination because it is multifaceted in the experiences of the women. Women's experiences and uses of the virtual space, along with its consequences and conditions are represented clearly in a way that accounts for empowerment by the study. However, what we see consequentially is that it is still the woman who talks to another woman, invests a considerable intellectual capacity and time to fulfil the responsibility of childcare and domestic work by creating her

feminine space. From this point of view, the virtual community of mothers reinforces the exclusive female mothering and mechanisms of inequality.

The subjugation sourced from motherhood ideologies in tandem with patriarchal constructs does not grant any privilege to a group of women considered advantaged. What differs here is how various ideologies challenged women and the way they respond and resist to it according to their positions in society. There is definitely a disconnect between postmodern representations of women and what we live in our real lives. The irony is that the freely choosing, autonomous, maternal feminine figure of women does not diminish the detrimental effects of being a mother in our society. Probably my personal experience as a woman and a mother illustrates one of the examples of this argument. In the 21st century, grown as a productive citizen, an economically independent, educated young career woman, I have experienced a transition to single motherhood in which I have taken under a review of divorce legislation based on the criteria of adequacy of my domestic services in my marriage (sexuality, cooking, nurturing...) under the name of “duty of womanhood”, I have to prove the fulfillment of those demands of the marriage contract, and I am threatened by counterclaim of custody to decrease my financial demands for my children. So, while I respect women’s efforts in individualism, I am full of apprehension about the supposition of all the rights gained and barriers to gender inequality and power imbalances surpassed. Recognizing the intellectual fertility of any women movement promiscuously and acknowledging the mother-child bond without the stress of essentialism, without a conflict of women’s interest with their children’s; as of today’s, women we need to find our own way to direct our efforts socially and politically to set an agenda regarding social changes to support women in their needs in every aspect of their life.

We need to be cautious about the women’s ability to access the technologically enabled spaces, which are still relatively exclusive. However, any women should not

be marginalized because they are socially advantaged. Today many technologically component women are still not aware of how to engage and use digital media and technologies in a way that advantaged them. At issue is social needs, including support, acceptance and sense of belonging in respect to our obligations, relationships and responsibilities due to our identities as women and mothers. Based on the social conditions and artefacts represented by the social structures, either online or offline, the study has shown that women could imagine and implement an identity that redefines their positions through seeking to respond and transform social constructions and structures that prove their efficiency in their social lives. By taking into consideration the uneven distribution of suffering, I suggest that no matter which women, every one of us has the capacity to be vulnerable, so we should not address just inequalities and further our discussion to how we might intervene to create such structures, establish social grounds (whether or not enabled by digital technologies) and expand the opportunities that foster better our ability to use our capacity to be vulnerable to one another by acknowledging each other's suffering and subjectivity, then responding with care. Otherwise, how unmasking can occur, disclosure can produce change, and lives can become more fulfilling? The answers to these questions are of a human scope rather than an identity one. To that end, I am going to close with a question; How can we forge a bond between theory and practice and bridge the gap between online and offline? Together with the other voices, the voices of this study hopefully add to the collection of academic knowledge to explore those answers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sequential In-Depth Interview Questions

1. First of all, can you introduce yourself for me? Your occupation, education, age, family life etc.
2. Can we talk a little bit about your transition to motherhood and how you experience your life as a mother? What does motherhood mean to you? What is it like to be a mother for you?
3. As you look back on, are there any other events that stand out in your mind? Could you describe how did they affect you?
4. As a mother and a woman, have you had any difficulties or problems you encounter in your journey of motherhood? If any, what do you think were their sources?
5. What do you think about asking for help, advice? How do you go getting support and what do you think about the support you get to meet your needs? Who if any person is involved in providing support?
6. Could you tell me about your experience with your partner since you had a baby?
7. How would you describe person you are now? How would you compare the woman you hope to be and the person you see yourself as mother?
8. If possible, would there be anything you would like to change about the motherhood experience?
9. How did you come to know about the “Researching Mothers Community” and how long have you been a member?

10. How would you describe the platform of AA?
11. How does it make you feel to be a member of the group? Can you talk a little bit about its place in your life and your experiences with the platform? Are there any events, discussion, or interaction you experienced on the platform, that stands out in your mind?
12. What would you think if you were to compare the motherhood you experienced in the virtual environment with the ones in the physical space? What is the most important feature of the community for you?
13. Do you feel any kind of difference in your everyday experience of motherhood when we think of a situation where the platform is not in your life?
14. Do you feel any influence has the experience with the platform on your view and feelings about motherhood and your daily mothering practices? If any, can you elaborate on those?
15. What can help improve your experience of the platform?
16. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your experience better?
17. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Appendix B: Consent Forms

CONSENT FORM -In-Depth Interviews-
“An Analysis of Virtual Social Support Community of Mothers in the Context of Agency, Identity and Collectivity”

Dear Member of Arařtiran Anneler,

You have been invited to participate in the above-mentioned thesis research, which is planned within the scope of Bilgi University Communication Sciences Doctorate Program. Before accepting to take part in this research, you should understand the purpose of the research and make your decision freely within the framework of this information. Please read the information below carefully, if you have questions, please ask and seek clear answers.

Purpose and Description

Virtual communities are social networks that have been shaped and emerged through electronic media, and today they mediate people to come together virtually, share their experiences, find answers to their questions and find support. This study deals with women-to-women virtual support platforms in the context of motherhood. The Researching Mothers Group has been chosen as an example for this study because it meets the criteria of the aforementioned online women-to-women virtual support community and is one of the first organizations in this sense in Turkey. In the study, ethnographic observation and face-to-face interviews with the members will be used as the method of data collection.

This study, which includes only female mothers who are mothers in this group, tries to understand the communication practices among the participants and especially the virtual community experiences of women. It aims to reveal the impact of the experience gained from its virtual platform on everyday motherhood practices and its potential to transform the motherhood experience in the context of real-life. While contributing to the literature on women and motherhood with the findings to be obtained as a result of this academic study, it aims to better understand the concerns, needs and expectations of the woman who has chosen to become a mother for various

motherhood conditions and contexts, and to shed light on how to expand the benefits and opportunities that can be offered for them.

Conditions of Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely at your own discretion. You can refuse to take part in the research or withdraw from the research at any time after it has started. If you withdraw from the study, you will not face any sanctions or negative consequences. The results of this research will be used for scientific purposes, and if you withdraw from the research or are excluded from the research by the researcher, the data about you will not be used. However, once the data is anonymized, you will not be able to withdraw from the research.

Your participation will include in-depth face-to-face interviews with the researcher. Interviews will be held in a place convenient for you, will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes and will be audio recorded. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that allow you to elaborate on your answers. After 2-3 weeks of field observations by the researcher, you will be invited to participate in the semi-structured interview again to explore the observations made by the researcher during this time. This will provide a new opportunity for you to share your feelings, ideas and experiences.

Privacy and Confidentiality

All information obtained from the participants will be kept confidential, and the confidentiality of identity information, if any, will be preserved when the research is published. For the privacy of the participants, the identifying characteristics of the participants will be removed from the research records and pseudonyms will be given to the users in the transcripts throughout the thesis, which will provide anonymity. Although it is not possible to participate in the research without audio recordings, audio recordings will be transcribed and all electronic data will be password protected to restrict access for confidentiality and will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis. Recordings and transcriptions will not be used by the researcher for any purpose other than to aid analysis.

For any questions or for more information about the project, please contact one of the following research team members:

Researcher: Ayça Ulutaş Akman
Istanbul Bilgi University
Communication Ph.D. Programme
Email: aycaulutas@gmail.com
Tel: 05335827908

Advisor: Prof. Dr. Aslı Tunç
Istanbul Bilgi University
Faculty of Communication
Email: asli.tunc@bilgi.edu.tr

Consent to Participate

“I have read the text above, which contains the information that should be given to the volunteers before starting the research. I asked the researcher my questions about the issues that I thought were missing and got satisfactory answers. I believe that I fully understand all the written and oral explanations presented to me. I was given enough time to decide whether I wanted to participate in the study. Under these conditions, I declare that I accept the use of my personal information obtained within the scope of the research for scientific purposes, its submission and publication, provided that the rules of confidentiality are observed, and that I accept it of my own free will, without any pressure or coercion.”

Participants Name /Surname

Researcher Name/Surname

Signature

Signature

Date

Date

Note: The relevant form was prepared in two copies and one of the signed copies was delivered to the participant.

CONSENT FORM

-Participant Observation-

“An Analysis of Virtual Social Support Community of Mothers in the Context of Agency, Identity and Collectivity”

To whom it may concern,

I would like to invite you to assist me in conducting the above-mentioned research work planned within the scope of Bilgi University Communication Sciences Doctorate Program, and I request your acceptance and invitation to the Researching Mothers Group as a researcher. Before making a decision, you should understand why the research is being done and what it will involve for you, and you should make your decision freely within the framework of this information. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and ask questions and seek clear answers if you want more information or have questions.

Purpose and Description

Virtual communities are social networks that have been shaped and emerged through electronic media, and today they mediate people to come together virtually, share their experiences, find answers to their questions and find support. This study deals with women-to-women virtual support platforms in the context of motherhood. The Researching Mothers Group has been chosen as an example for this study because it meets the criteria of the aforementioned online women-to-women virtual support community and is one of the first organizations in this sense in Turkey. In the study, ethnographic observation and face-to-face interviews with the members will be used as the method of data collection.

This study, which includes only female mothers who are mothers in this group, tries to understand the communication practices among the participants and especially the virtual community experiences of women. It aims to reveal the impact of the experience gained from its virtual platform on everyday motherhood practices and its potential to transform the motherhood experience in the context of real-life. While contributing to the literature on women and motherhood with the findings to be obtained as a result of this academic study, it aims to better understand the concerns, needs and expectations of the woman who has chosen to become a mother for various motherhood conditions and contexts, and to shed light on how to expand the benefits and opportunities that can be offered for them.

Conditions of Participation

The research work detailed above will start with field observation and continue with face-to-face interviews, following your written approval as the founder and executive members of the Researching Mothers organization. Your support and consent for the conduct of this research is entirely at your discretion. You can refuse to take part in the research or withdraw from the research at any time after it has started. If you withdraw from the study, you will not face any sanctions or negative consequences. The results of this research will only be used for scientific purposes and will be shared with the group founders. Your participation and consent to the study includes support for the publication of information and announcement about the research in the group in order to reach the volunteer participants in the group so that the ethnographic observation to be carried out by the researcher and the interviews within the scope of the study can be carried out with the group members. In this way, members who volunteer to participate in the research will be able to contact the researcher directly. If deemed necessary by the researcher, face-to-face in-depth interviews can be conducted with the founding members, provided that they are completely voluntary.

Privacy and Confidentiality

‘All information obtained from the participants will be kept confidential, and the confidentiality of identity information, if any, will be preserved when the research is published. For the privacy of the participants, the identifying characteristics of the participants will be removed from the research records and pseudonyms will be given to the users in the transcripts throughout the thesis, which will provide anonymity. Although it is not possible to participate in the research without audio recordings, audio recordings will be transcribed and all electronic data will be password protected to restrict access for confidentiality and will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis. Recordings and transcriptions will not be used by the researcher for any purpose other than to aid analysis.’

For any questions or for more information about the project, please contact one of the following research team members:

Researcher: Ayça Ulutaş Akman
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Advisor: Prof. Dr. Aslı Tunç
Istanbul Bilgi University
Faculty of Communication
Email: asli.tunc@bilgi.edu.tr

Consent to Participate

“I have read the text above, which contains the information that should be given to the volunteers before starting the research. I asked the researcher my questions about the issues that I thought were missing and got satisfactory answers. I believe that I fully understand all the written and oral explanations presented to me. I was given enough time to decide whether I wanted to participate in the study. Under these conditions, I declare that I accept the use of the information obtained within the scope of the research for scientific purposes, its submission and publication, provided that the rules of confidentiality are observed, and that I accept it of my own free will, without any pressure or coercion.”

Authorized Name /Surname

Researcher Name/Surname

Signature

Signature

Date

Date

Note: The relevant form was prepared in two copies and one of the signed copies was delivered to the gatekeeper.

Appendix C: Arařtiran Anneler-Facebook Platform Recruitment Message

Dear Members of Arařtiran Anneler,

Hello, my name is Ayça Ulutař. My story with AA started with the need to reach other mothers who had similar experiences with me during a difficult transition to single motherhood. Today, I am a Ph.D. candidate in communication at Istanbul Bilgi University. I am conducting doctoral dissertation research on women-to-women virtual support platforms in the context of motherhood. The experience I had here give rise to the idea of carrying the platform of Arařtiran Anneler to the academic field I am in with the support of the founders of the group. My research aims to reveal the impact of the experience gained from the virtual platform on everyday motherhood practices and its potential to transform the motherhood experience in the context of real-life. Envisioning a better experience of motherhood, I hope this study will shed light on the social issues and needs of women. As a member of the family, a mother and a social researcher devoted to women's studies, I am inviting you to participate because I believe that the woman should have the floor in the experience of motherhood, and I think that such a study can only be carried out with a common mind. This study is open to all women who are mothering or mother-to be, and wants to give voice to the research. For more detailed information and participation in the research, which will be carried out with iterative one-to-one interviews and conversations via video conference, you can contact me through DM or can reach one of the following addresses: ayca.akman.ayca.ulutas@bilgiedu.net, hello@arastirananneler.com.tr

Thank you

ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL

Ethics Board Approval is available in the printed version of this dissertation.