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How Alpha-Mom Blog Use Enhances the Mental Health of Mothers of Young Children: From the Perspective of Self-Determination Theory

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ABSTRACT: Backgrounds: Alpha-mom blog refers to social media posts that portray mothers who excel at domestic life and childcare, presenting an idealized image of the perfect mother. The popularity of the Alpha-mom blog has led to increased academic interest in the impact on maternal psychology. Based on Self-Determination Theory, this study aims to explain the relationship between Alpha-mom blog use, parenting self-efficacy, perceived social support, and mothers' mental health. **Methods:** An online cross-sectional survey with 649 Chinese mothers of young children was conducted ($M_{age} = 29.71$, $SD = 3.53$). The majority of participants came from low-to-middle-income households and had only one child. This study used SPSS 24.0 and PROCESS macro 3.1 for data analysis. **Results:** The findings indicate that (1) Alpha-mom blog use indirectly and positively predicts mental health through parenting self-efficacy and perceived social support; (2) Endorsement of intensive mothering serves as a potent moderator, suggesting that Alpha-mom blog use has comparatively stronger effects on parenting self-efficacy and perceived social support for mothers with low endorsement of intensive mothering. **Conclusions:** The study suggests that social media plays a positive role in enhancing mothers' sense of empowerment and mental health, while acknowledging the potential limitations of the Alpha-mom blog in benefiting vulnerable young mothers with multiple children and lower income status.

KEYWORDS: Mommy blog; parenting self-efficacy; perceived social support; mental health; Alpha-mom

1 Introduction

Nowadays, new mothers often use the internet and social media to understand what childcare experiences should look like [1]. Thanks to the freedom of expression about the motherhood experience, mothers of young children needed a new form of communication and emotional support, and so the practice of blogging by mothers was born [2]. Mommy bloggers not only maintain the credibility of their narratives of hardship but also sustain emotional connections through parenting practices that resonate with their audience [3]. They engage in self-construction and find their own subject positions through interactions with various gender discourses [4].

A typical genre of mommy blog is characterized as the Alpha-mom, posted by well-educated and tech-savvy bloggers [5]. The Alpha-mom blogs are social media posts depicting mothers who are good at family life and parenting, and portraying the perfect model of motherhood [5]. With the help of these blogs, mothers obtain information with little effort, as the affordances of social media enable the frequent and rapid dissemination of posts, along with the option of brief commentaries [6]. Social media brings

them a stronger sense of self-efficacy in motherhood practice while aggregating people of similar life courses. Mothers with similar experiences form emotional connections and achieve emotional support in producing and communicating practical parenting knowledge [7]. On the other hand, Alpha-mom blogs may encourage repression among mothers by setting high standards for social comparison and fostering competitiveness [8,9], whereas misinformation on blogs has become commonplace and can influence major parenting decisions [10].

Mothers of young children are at risk of developing mental health problems, as parenting can be stressful and challenging, requiring considerable social and financial resources [11]. Prior studies indicate that young mothers are likely to have poor social support and encounter stressful events [12]. Women who are experiencing early motherhood may find themselves feeling more stressed and uncertain about the future after a public health crisis than they did before [13]. They need to experience motherhood more positively and make a greater sense of a meaningful life. Although existing studies have made critical discussions on the negative side of mommy blogs, it remains unclear under what circumstances these blogs would exert positive influences rather than lead to anxieties or depression for new mothers. As a framework for behavioral intervention, Self-Determination Theory helps to identify mechanisms underlying the interaction between social media environments and psychological well-being [14]. It facilitates us to explore how Alpha-mom blogs may support users' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Specifically, this study aims to explore the potential association between Alpha-mom blog use, parenting self-efficacy, perceived social support, and mental health.

2 Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Alpha-Mom Blog Use and Mothers' Mental Health

Mothers with young children, especially those who were born after the 1990s, are actively engaged in viewing, posting, reposting, commenting, and clicking likes for childcare-related blogs. The sense of shared experience was an important reason why mothers used the internet to find information about parenting [8]. Researchers described the effects of mommy blogging as "a radical act" [15] because the blog posts largely originated from the real experiences of mothers rather than professional advisors. Due to various considerations like impression management, mommy blogging "can be both a source of pride and a source of embarrassment; it can both compliment and demean" [15].

Blog posts from Alpha-mom blogger often upload polished texts, pictures, and videos that conceal the torture of motherhood. The Alpha-moms aim to excel in motherhood and other aspects of life [5]. Alpha-mom blogs suggest the mother is the primary childcare giver and spends an amount of time and money on the child [16]. The image of the "Alpha mom" is usually regarded as an ideal because of its perfect nature and expectations of motherhood. Consequently, the successful motherhood experience in Alpha-mom blogs tends to be followed by ordinary mothers in continuous learning from online posts and through reality. Mothers gain opportunities to enhance their abilities and try to use new media to solve their dilemmas and change unfavorable situations, which can be beneficial for physical and mental health adjustment [17]. According to a panel dataset analysis, internet use has a positive impact on the mental health of married women in China [18]. In a similar vein, we assume that media use behavior concerning Alpha-mom blogs would positively impact mothers' mentality. To be specific, the first hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 1: *Alpha-mom blog use is positively associated with mothers' mental health.*

2.2 Understanding Alpha-Mom Blog Use through Self-Determination Theory

To explain issues about motivation and psychosocial development, Self-Determination Theory offers an interpretive perspective. This theory may provide us with a constructive angle to understand the Alpha-mom blog use. Self-Determination theory suggests that psychological well-being is predicted by three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence [19,20]. Autonomy is defined as the need to feel a sense of agency or volition, with the knowledge that one is the origin of one's own behaviors [19]. Relatedness encompasses the desire to feel interconnected with others and a sense of belonging [19]. Competence signifies the necessity to articulate or cultivate one's skills and attain accomplishments through a variety of activities [19]. Satisfying these three psychological needs, which reflect positive human functioning, is crucial for improving individuals' mental health [20].

Concerning mothers' autonomy and competence needs, after viewing a blog post about children's talent discovery (e.g., learn to dance), decisions about whether to let kids have early childhood education are made based on volition and interests, and mothers feel a sense of pride when watching their kids perform. These self-driven actions contribute to a sense of autonomy [21]. In the meantime, the need for competence can be satisfied by outperforming others (e.g., winning at a children's dance competition) or assigning meaning to performance efforts and advancements. Mothers of young children can also gain a sense of competence and achievement from children's talent shows and demonstrate their cognitive and social abilities.

For the need for relatedness, this inborn desire to connect and bond with others in a social group [21] may be satisfied through involvement in mum's chat groups associated with blogs. For instance, a sense of belonging can be developed directly from posts like sharing experiences in parenting children with ADHD or indirectly from cheering or supporting one's childcare effort.

2.3 Parenting Self-Efficacy, Perceived Social Support, and Mothers' Mental Health

In most media psychology studies, relationships between social media use and mental health are explored through mediation analyses to examine the reasons behind [22]. Following the vein of Self-Determination Theory, parenting self-efficacy and perceived social support could play important roles in satisfying autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs, which are closely related to mothers' mental health.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's subjective assessment of his or her ability to perform a particular aspect of work, and the results of that assessment can affect a person's motivation [23]. Parenting self-efficacy helps to explain the psychological impact of childcare skills in motherhood. Since the theoretical framework of self-efficacy asserts that a belief in one's efficacy is an important predictor of actual efficacy [23], it is important to examine the parenting self-efficacy of mothers. The abundant knowledge in Alpha-mom blogs would help mothers build self-confidence and encourage positive thoughts about their maternal roles. The traffic nature of digital media empowers mothers to participate in online, in-home social production and earn economic rewards, contributing to their sense of self-efficacy and self-identity from a labor empowerment perspective [17]. When mothers show their parenting skills, mastering media technologies and leveraging platform algorithms strategies on social media, it is an opportunity to find recognition, develop their interests, and create a space for relaxation [3,24], which can cause positive psychological effects. This study specifically examines the role of parenting self-efficacy in its association with Alpha-mom blog use and its impact on mothers' mental health. We propose the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *Parenting self-efficacy mediates the relationship between Alpha-mom blog use and mothers' mental health.*

It is well established that supportive communication plays a complex mediating role in mental health experience, and social support in the digital era provides various kinds of assistance to vulnerable groups through the functions of information production, dissemination, and social communication [3,25]. Social support was regarded as one of the most significant factors in the development of maternal competence [26]. It plays a significant role in reducing stress and improving coping skills among mothers, as well as preventing depression and increasing overall well-being [27]. New media have created a new social network for mothers and increased their sense of identity with the motherhood community regarding relational empowerment [17]. Mothers with young children attach great importance to the information and support they receive from and share on online sources and social media [28,29]. A previous study found that people who received a lot of emotional support were less likely to be diagnosed with depression [30], and people who were satisfied with the social support they received were less likely to have severe depressive symptoms [31]. This study focuses on the role of perceived social support in the relationship between Alpha-mom blog use and mothers' psychological status. Here comes the third research hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: *Perceived social support mediates the relationship between Alpha-mom blog use and mothers' mental health.*

2.4 The Moderating Role of Endorsement of Intensive Mothering

Intensive mothering is defined as a 'child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive' investment [16,32]. The endorsement of intensive mothering evaluates the belief of maternal employment, child-rearing, self-sacrifice, and mothering as a natural talent [33]. The media content of celebrity motherhood discourse and formal and informal online parenting information promotes the ideology of intensive mothering. Endorsement of intensive mothering is a matter of opinion rather than ability [9]. Restricted by economic reasons, mothers who cannot afford to hire domestic assistance are less likely to engage in personalized practices and empowering behaviors on social media and thus have relatively low perceptions of self-efficacy and social support [17]. However, at the same time, because their parenting style makes it difficult to meet the ideal standards of intensive motherhood, they can construct their image of good motherhood in a way that reduces their demands, thereby gaining a sense of self-worth as mothers, and endeavoring to develop self-efficacy and seek social support in a challenging parenting environment [34]. Mothers with different degrees of intensive mothering endorsement probably have different levels of self-efficacy and perceived social support. To find out whether there is a moderating role of the endorsement of intensive mothering, the study further raises the following question:

Research Question: *Does endorsement of intensive motherhood moderate the relationship between Alpha-mom blog use and parenting self-efficacy, and the relationship between Alpha-mom blog use and perceived social support?*

3 Method

3.1 Study Design and Participants

Researchers conducted an online questionnaire survey in China targeting mothers with children aged three and under. Quota sampling was used, according to the 2021 China Statistical Yearbook, based on

the distribution of urban and rural residents, educational background, and family income. We chose the age of three as a cut-off point because three-year-old children are mature enough to enter institutional childcare in many countries [35]. An online crowdsourcing platform in mainland China (Available from: <http://www.wenjuan.com>) was used, which is equivalent to Amazon Mechanical Turk. We used the quota sampling service provided by the survey platform to ensure that respondents met the study criteria. The survey included three attention test questions, and after excluding invalid responses with completion times under five minutes, we obtained 649 valid responses. The data were collected within two weeks in September 2022. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (protocol code: H2022199I). All participants signed informed consent, and data remained anonymous and confidential.

For the demographic characteristics of the participants (see Table 1), the age range was from 22 to 43 ($M = 29.71$, $SD = 3.53$). Among the participants, almost half were from the 22–29 age group (49.8%), followed by the 30–39 (49.1%) and the 40 and above (1.1%). Most of the participants (90.0%) had only one child, while others (10.0%) were already mothers with two children. Regarding the level of education, over one-third of participants had an undergraduate degree (39.1%), followed by senior secondary level (36.2%), junior secondary level (16.2%), and a few participants had a degree of graduate and above (8.5%). Concerning the annual family income, about half of the participants' families earned 80,000–129,999 CNY per year (42.2%), followed by the group of 130,000–189,999 CNY (22.5%), and the group of 190,000–249,999 CNY (10.0%).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants ($n = 649$).

| Demographic Variable | Item | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Age range | 22–29 | 323 | 49.8 |
| | 30–39 | 319 | 49.1 |
| | ≥40 | 7 | 1.1 |
| Number of children | 1 | 584 | 90.0 |
| | 2 | 65 | 10.0 |
| Educational level | Junior secondary | 105 | 16.2 |
| | Senior secondary | 235 | 36.2 |
| | College/University graduate | 254 | 39.1 |
| | Postgraduate | 55 | 8.5 |

3.2 Predictor Variable

Alpha-mom blogs are defined as blog or vlog posts presenting competent mothers who are good at family life and childcare, creating an almost perfect image of a model mother [5]. The texts, pictures, and videos in the postings are often carefully edited, demonstrating a positive mental state and ability to perform a variety of mothering tasks well. To evaluate how the participants use mommy blogs on digital media platforms, we developed an “Alpha-mom” blog use scale. This is a 7-point scale including 6 items (1 = never to 7 = very often). We provided the definition of the Alpha-mom blog to the participants, then asked them about the frequency of viewing, posting, sharing, commenting, reposting, and clicking likes with these blog posts from social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and TikTok over the last 12 months (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$).

3.3 Mediating Variables

Parenting self-efficacy was assessed through a modified version of the general self-efficacy scale [36]. The original scale has achieved good validity in various settings, and we adapted it to a childbearing context. This 7-point parenting self-efficacy scale has 8 items (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Participants were asked to assess their agreement level on statements like “When facing difficult childcare tasks, I’m sure I would accomplish them,” “I can achieve most of the childcare goals I set for myself,” and “I can successfully deal with the many challenges that come with my kid” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$).

The perceived social support scale measures the emotional, instrumental, and informational support in daily life (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). This study selected 16 items from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and the 2-way Social Support Scale [37,38], and the emerged scale has quite good validity and reliability. Statements include “Someone in my life can give me hope or confidence,” “Someone in my life can help find people to assist me,” and “Someone in my life can express sorrow or regret for my distress” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$).

3.4 Criterion Variable

Mothers’ mental health was assessed on a 7-point scale (1 = never to 7 = very often). It has 5 items selected from the Mental Health Inventory [39]. The scale measures general emotional well-being rather than identifying clinical diagnoses and conditions. We asked participants to rate how much of the time during the last month they felt depressed, nervous, downhearted, happy, and peaceful (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$).

3.5 Moderating Variable

The endorsement of intensive mothering was measured by a 7-point scale developed by a prior study [9]. The scale includes 6 items (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Items include “Women are the best primary caretakers of children,” “Women must devote all the time and energy to their children,” “Child rearing requires expert level knowledge,” “Childrearing requires a high cost,” “Giving up one’s career to be-come a better mother is rewarding,” and “I feel guilty for not being a better mother” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.71$).

3.6 Covariates

Based on related studies concerning mothers’ mental health [5,9,11,12,40], demographic variables such as age, educational level, employment status, marital status, physical health condition, household income, number of children, and children’s age are listed as control variables. We consider the study focusing on a specific group of mothers with children under 3, and there were no significant differences among the survey respondents in terms of marital status, employment status, and physical health condition, mothers’ age, educational level, annual family income, and number of children were listed as control variables in this study to ensure core confounders were included.

3.7 Reliability and Validity Tests

As mentioned, the reliability coefficients for the core variable scales are all above 0.7. Since the scales used in this study to measure latent variables are derived from established, well-validated instruments, they demonstrate good content validity. Furthermore, the factor loadings for all factors are above 0.4, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value is 0.938, the overall Bartlett’s sphericity test chi-square value is 11,261.557 (df = 820, $p < 0.001$), and the cumulative variance explained is 56.17%. The composite reliability (CR) for all latent variables is above 0.7, and the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeds 0.5, indicating that the questionnaire has internal consistency and demonstrates good convergent validity.

3.8 Data Analysis

SPSS 24.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) was used for data analysis. The initial analyses presented descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations for the variables. Then, regression and mediation analyses

were conducted using Model 4 of Hayes' PROCESS macro. Finally, the moderation effect analysis was conducted using Model 7 within the PROCESS macro. The models employed the Bootstrap analyses (5000 resamples) to evaluate the significance of direct and indirect effects. Data are presented as mean \pm standard deviation (SD). Bootstrap sampling with 5000 resamples was used to generate 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the indirect effects. A p -value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant in a two-tailed test.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

This study uses SPSS 24.0 and PROCESS 3.1 for descriptive and regression analysis. The correlation statistics between the variables are presented in Table 2. The statistics show a significant correlation between Alpha-mom blog use, parenting self-efficacy, perceived social support, endorsement of intensive mothering, and mothers' mental health.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis ($n = 649$).

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|--------|--------|------|
| 1. Mothers' mental health | - | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Alpha-mom blog use | 0.115** | - | | | | | | | |
| 3. Parenting self-efficacy | 0.419** | 0.199** | - | | | | | | |
| 4. Perceived social support | 0.438** | 0.227** | 0.594** | - | | | | | |
| 5. Endorsement of intensive mothering | 0.118** | 0.087* | 0.354** | 0.336** | - | | | | |
| 6. Age | 0.087* | 0.004 | 0.079* | -0.037 | 0.005 | - | | | |
| 7. Number of children | -0.091* | 0.046 | -0.064 | -0.031 | -0.044 | 0.176** | - | | |
| 8. Education | -0.023 | -0.019 | 0.028 | -0.006 | -0.002 | 0.089* | 0.013 | - | |
| 9. Income | 0.163** | 0.023 | 0.102** | 0.091* | 0.014 | 0.126** | -0.063 | 0.079* | - |
| Mean | 5.00 | 4.14 | 5.06 | 5.23 | 4.90 | 29.71 | 1.10 | 4.41 | 3.95 |
| Standard deviation | 1.12 | 0.91 | 0.88 | 0.77 | 0.80 | 3.53 | 0.30 | 0.89 | 1.53 |
| Skewness | -0.61 | -0.57 | -0.66 | -0.64 | -0.24 | 0.52 | 2.67 | 0.22 | 1.08 |
| Kurtosis | -0.19 | 1.01 | 0.34 | 0.16 | -0.08 | 0.39 | 5.15 | 0.16 | 0.67 |

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

4.2 Regression Analysis

The results presented in Table 3 provide multiple regression results between Alpha-mom blog use, parenting self-efficacy, and perceived social support with mothers' mental health. The table presents that Alpha-mom blog use is positively associated with mothers' mental health, though the result is not significant. Therefore, H1 is not supported. Drawing on these results, we step to analyze the mediating effect of parenting self-efficacy between Alpha-mom blog use and mothers' mental health, and the mediating effect of perceived social support between blog use and mothers' mental health.

The mediation analyses were performed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (version 3.1; model 4) [41]. Data analysis (see Supplementary Tables S1 and S2) demonstrates that Alpha-mom blog use is significantly and positively correlated with parenting self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.192$, $p < 0.001$); Alpha-mom blog use is significantly and positively associated with perceived social support ($\beta = 0.192$, $p < 0.001$); parenting self-efficacy is significantly and positively correlated with mothers' mental health ($\beta = 0.500$, $p < 0.001$); perceived social support is significantly and positively associated with mental health ($\beta = 0.617$, $p < 0.001$); and Alpha-mom blog use is indirectly and positively correlated with mental health through parenting self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.054$, 95%CI [0.025, 0.088]) and perceived social support ($\beta = 0.083$, 95%CI [0.048, 0.125]).

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis of Mothers' Mental Health.

| | β | SE | t |
|--------------------------|----------|-------|--------|
| Constant | 0.682 | 0.479 | 1.424 |
| Alpha-mom blog use | 0.006 | 0.043 | 0.134 |
| Parenting self-efficacy | 0.278*** | 0.055 | 5.033 |
| Perceived social support | 0.435*** | 0.063 | 6.939 |
| Age | 0.027* | 0.011 | 2.382 |
| Number of children | -0.283* | 0.130 | -2.167 |
| Education | -0.038 | 0.043 | -0.877 |
| Income | 0.074** | 0.026 | 2.901 |

F = 31.174***; R² = 0.254; adjusted R² = 0.246

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, SE: Standard Error.

To test H2 and H3, we focus on the total, direct, and indirect effects of the mediated models. The analysis (see Supplementary Table S3) indicates that the confidence intervals of indirect effects do not include 0, indicating significant mediation effects. Thus, both H2 and H3 are supported. Alpha-mom blog use is positively associated with parenting self-efficacy and social support, which are also positively associated with mothers' mental health. There is a parallel multiple mediation effect of parenting self-efficacy and perceived social support between Alpha-mom blog use and mothers' mental health.

Next, the PROCESS macro for SPSS helps with moderated mediation analysis. Using 5000 Bootstrap samples and a 95% CI, Model 7 was adopted to address RQ [41]. The conditional effects of Alpha-mom blog use are presented in Table 4. As for the moderating role of the endorsement of intensive mothering, this study found that the main effect of Alpha-mom blog use affecting parenting self-efficacy is significant, as well as the interaction term of blog use and endorsement of intensive mothering. The main effect of Alpha-mom blog use on social support is significant, as is the interaction term of blog use and endorsement of intensive mothering. Alpha-mom blog use has comparatively stronger effects on parenting self-efficacy and perceived social support when the endorsement of intensive mothering level is relatively low. Figs. 1 and 2 provide the visualized moderating role of endorsement of intensive mothering.

The above results suggest that the level of Alpha-mom blog use indirectly affects mothers' mental health through parenting self-efficacy and perceived social support. When the level of Alpha-mom blog use increases, they are more likely to obtain greater parenting self-efficacy and perceived social support, thus increasing their level of mental health in their childbearing experiences. The impact of blog use on parenting self-efficacy and social support varied in terms of different levels of the endorsement of intensive mothering. Fig. 3 presents the overall theoretical model of this study.

Table 4: Conditional Effects of Alpha-mom Blog Use on Parenting Self-efficacy and Perceived Social Support at Different Levels of Endorsement of Intensive Mothering (EIM).

| IV | DV | Moderator: EIM | B | SE | 95% CIs |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-------|-------|----------------|
| Alpha-mom blog use | Parenting self-efficacy | Low (M - 1 SD) | 0.260 | 0.049 | [0.163, 0.356] |
| | | Mean (M) | 0.180 | 0.035 | [0.111, 0.248] |
| | | High (M + 1 SD) | 0.100 | 0.042 | [0.017, 0.181] |
| | Perceived social support | Low (M - 1 SD) | 0.292 | 0.043 | [0.207, 0.377] |
| | | Mean (M) | 0.188 | 0.031 | [0.128, 0.249] |
| | | High (M + 1 SD) | 0.085 | 0.037 | [0.012, 0.157] |

Note: M: Mean, SD: Standard Deviation, IV: Independent Variable, DV: Dependent Variable, CI: Confidence Interval.

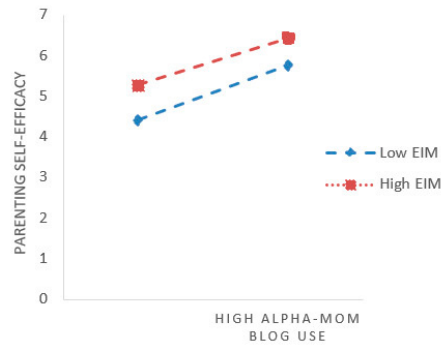


Figure 1: The moderating effect of EIM on parenting self-efficacy.

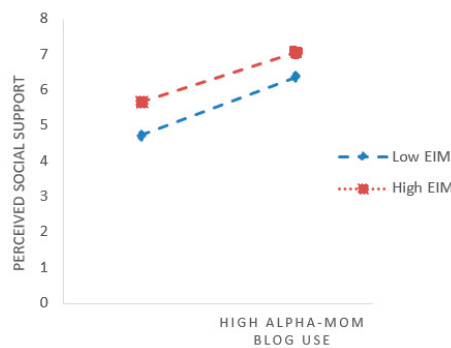


Figure 2: The moderating effect of EIM on perceived social support.

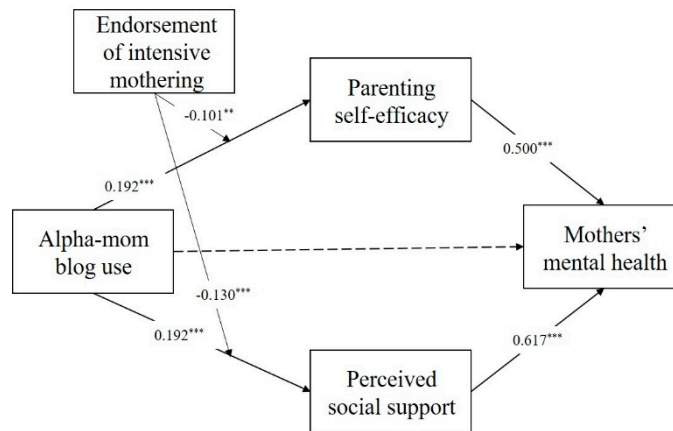


Figure 3: Theoretical research model (Note: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$).

5 Discussion

Mothers with young children currently depend on digital media for information-seeking and emotional exchange. Social media fundamentally changes mothering discourses for mommy blog users [42]. Mommy blogs make an undeniable contribution to increasing public visibility and recognition of mothers, which has led to mothers having more opportunities for sharing knowledge and presenting various practices [43]. Accordingly, mommy blogs encourage academic attention to the impact on maternal psychology. Based on

the consensus that mothers' well-being is influenced by a range of social factors [44], this study examines the relationship between Alpha-mom blog use, parenting self-efficacy, social support, and mothers' mental health. The main finding is that the Alpha-mom blog use indirectly and positively predicts mothers' mental health through parenting self-efficacy and perceived social support. The endorsement of intensive motherhood negatively moderates the relationship between Alpha-mom blog use and parenting self-efficacy and the relationship between Alpha-mom blog use and perceived social support.

Regarding mothers' psychological empowerment, this study asserts the important role digital media plays in providing virtual support and information sources that enhance mothers' sense of empowerment and mental health. Mommy blogs can be seen as providing a more authentic way of engaging with the audience than professional websites. Unlike celebrities and professionals, some Alpha-mom bloggers are ordinary people who are accessible, relatable, and realistic role models. Bloggers remain persuasive to readers and viewers by sustaining communicative intimacies and perceived interconnectedness through the interactive use of digital media [45]. This study was conducted in the post-pandemic period in China, as interpersonal communication channels were hindered during the pandemic, digital media has emerged as a powerful tool for empowering women by providing a new platform for information [46]. Mothers could find adaptation through mommy blog use, which is an important step to better understanding intensive motherhood [47]. We suggest that we should somewhat recognize the positive effect brought by the presentation of intensive motherhood. Unsurprisingly, the mothers with the most access to resources (e.g., high-income; childcare services) and fewer children are the ones who seem most capable of having a sound mental status.

The results indicate that Alpha-mom blog use indirectly predicts mothers' mental health through parenting self-efficacy, which implies the autonomy and competence dimension of Self-Determination Theory. The statistical testing result illustrates that the blog use does not directly lead to significant psychological consequences, but it depends on how their sense of capability has been elevated. Although Alpha-mom blogs may lead mothers to diagnose or discipline their behaviors, they have certain benefits in disseminating parenting skills and resources available for teaching new parents about the daily aspects of childcare [8]. Managing a mommy blog becomes an opportunity for self-betterment because when they post and comment on virtual space, they turn this moment into an opportunity to become a better, tougher, and more resilient person [48].

The next important finding is that the Alpha-mom blog use indirectly predicts mothers' mental health through another mediating path of perceived social support. This is a contextual manifestation of the relatedness dimension of the Self-Determination Theory. Apart from strengthened self-efficacy, effective instrumental and emotional social support helps to build a good mentality. Most mommy blog users are not medical professionals, and they are likely to provide non-judgmental companionship, esteem support, and informational support [49]. Online support could be translated into a sense of empowerment through increased confidence and self-control. This media action support enabled mothers to transcend the limitations of their individual experiences and feel that they were not alone, but had something to rely on and support to enhance their sense of well-being [50]. Young mothers quickly used the media to raise awareness of their needs and to receive support from the community [46].

It is interesting to discover that Alpha-mom blog use has a stronger effect on parenting self-efficacy and social support when the endorsement of intensive mothering level is low. This finding stimulates new insight for understanding Self-Determination Theory through mommy blog use. Especially for the new generation of mothers, they tend to perceive themselves as autonomous and active maternal agents rather than passive recipients within traditional patriarchal structures [51]. When interacting with Alpha-mom

blogs, mothers need to have a strong sense of freedom to make choices and act. Similarly, a previous study found that the less anxious the mother's attachment style, the more spiritual growth and personal strength she experienced [52]. Mothers with young children are supposed to break free from the constraints of the ideal mother role, constructing a new, self-centered image of motherhood [53]. Without high recognition of intensive motherhood, social comparisons will not be made easily, and thus ordinary mothers are more likely to benefit from the Alpha-mom blog.

However, we must keep in mind that the internet is not an intrinsically empowering technology. Social media has certainly changed the way people seek and share health-related information [54], but digital technology itself may not be directly transferred to empowerment for individual women. We should not assume that digital media would be beneficial for all mothers with young children [8]. According to the correlation and multiple regression results, elder mothers, who had fewer children and received higher income, seem to have more chances to improve their self-efficacy and perceive more social support through mommy blogs, and thus develop a positive mindset. On the contrary, younger mothers, who have more children and receive a lower income, might suffer psychologically from mommy blogs. The Alpha-mom blog still cannot fully address the issue of empowering the vulnerable group by facilitating the enhancement of mental well-being.

To create a more robust information environment on social media and improve knowledge that can contribute to reducing mental health disparities, innovative collaboration is required between health organizations, the technology industry, academia, and community stakeholders [55]. For policymakers, they should pay more attention to the mental health of vulnerable groups of mothers with young children and mobilize the community to share the burden of motherhood. For healthcare practitioners, there should be proper guidance and flexible use of online intervention mechanisms to provide more personalized psychological treatment services. For media platforms, it is important to establish an early warning mechanism for misinformation on mommy blogs, as well as blocking sensitive words that are likely to trigger social comparisons.

6 Limitations and Future Perspectives

Our findings should be interpreted within some limitations. First, the results were based on cross-sectional self-reported data, which means causality inference is lacking. We recommend that future studies adopt an experimental approach to further explore the causal relationship between media use and mental health consequences. Besides, a qualitative or a longitudinal design can yield deep and thorough interpretations. Second, the results of this study may apply to Chinese society or the East Asian context. In the context of Chinese culture, the gender roles of the "ideal wife and mother" have long been deeply ingrained [3]. The results would be enriched by including samples from other countries or regions that have different gender role values.

As for the type of mommy blog, we only focus on the Alpha-mom blog use. Some blogs tend to present a more realistic side of motherhood. When motherhood bloggers or influencers share their unedited experiences of motherhood, they probably believe that it is acceptable to have weaknesses and to talk about the challenges they face [15,56]. These realistic blogs enable mothers to express and share frustrations and seek solidarity [57]. The results would be more fruitful if future studies compare the psychological outcomes of Alpha-mom and realistic mommy blogs to see what exactly the differences are. Although there is a strong relationship between mental health and mental illness [40], future research is suggested to examine the relationship between mommy blog use and mothers' specific mental conditions, such as fear, anxiety, and depression concerning childcare.

7 Conclusions

Guided by Self-Determination Theory, this study aims to explain the relationship between Alpha-mom blog use, parenting self-efficacy, perceived social support, and mothers' mental health. An online cross-sectional survey with 649 Chinese mothers of young children was conducted. The key finding is that Alpha-mom blog use indirectly and positively predicts mental health through parenting self-efficacy and perceived social support. Endorsement of intensive mothering serves as a potent moderator, indicating that Alpha-mom blog use has comparatively stronger effects on parenting self-efficacy and perceived social support for mothers with low endorsement of intensive mothering. The results suggest social media plays a positive role in enhancing mothers' sense of empowerment and mental health, laying an empirical foundation for policymaking and intervention mechanism development regarding mental health promotion of mothers of young children.

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Supplementary Materials: The supplementary material is available online at <https://www.techscience.com/doi/10.32604/ijmhp.2026.079812/s1>. Table S1: The Mediation Effect of Parenting Self-efficacy between Alpha-mom Blog Use and Mothers' Mental Health; Table S2: The Mediation Effect of Perceived Social Support between Alpha-mom Blog Use and Mothers' Mental Health; Table S3: Direct Effects, Indirect Effects, and the Overall Effect on Mothers' Mental Health.

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