
Sticky Baby Dust After Baby Dancing: Guilt and Judgment in “Trying to Conceive” Communities on YouTube

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Abstract

Pregnancy is more than the physiological state one is in before giving birth. Many technologies have been designed to physiologically manage pregnancy and its symptoms, but often focus less on the emotional aspect of pregnancy. In this work, we examined over 400 YouTube videos (and their subsequent comments) created by 16 women documenting their journey in trying to conceive and their successful pregnancy experiences. We found that, aside from the joys of pregnancy and the anticipation of a new birth, there can be an emotionally painful side to pregnancy. Women may be subject to an inner guilt and the external judgement of others—such as the guilt of not being able to provide a child for their partner or judgment from others struggling to conceive. These women used the YouTube platform not only to document their own journey, but also as a way to acknowledge and, at times, speak out against societal norms that are expected of women who are trying to conceive. We provide design and research considerations for technologies that can encourage and bring light to the often invisible emotional work of pregnancy.

Guilt & Judgment in TTC Communities

YouTube Video: You'll get a comment like, "you shouldn't be complaining about anything...be thankful and remember that you're pregnant and you should be thankful"...just because I said something slightly on the negative side, where I was upset about something, it doesn't mean I'm not grateful to be pregnant. [V15.20]

Comment (in response): I have been nervous to talk about the realities of my pregnancy too. Let's just say I am in utter agony everyday from heartburn that will not go away...I haven't always shared every discomfort I have experienced because I'm afraid someone is going to say the same to me, even though it's so far from the truth.

Author Keywords

Pregnancy; YouTube; trying to conceive; emotion.

ACM Classification Keywords

J.3 Life and Medical Sciences: Health.

Introduction

Pregnancy is often seen as a physiological change of a woman's body, where information sources for those trying to conceive or are pregnant are usually medically focused on the physical changes and symptoms that may happen. Even when resources address the emotional aspect of pregnancy, it is often worded in terms of symptoms (e.g., moodiness or tearfulness due to an influx of hormones). When women struggle to conceive, they face judgment in conceiving in "the right way." The struggle to conceive can be a difficult and overwhelming experience.

We examined over 400 videos and their subsequent comments of 16 women documenting their journey from trying to conceive (TTC) to becoming pregnant. Our findings show that women who are trying to conceive not only feel a certain sense of guilt when they cannot conceive, but when they become pregnant, they are expected to act a certain way due to their previous struggles with infertility. They feel guilty when they complain about the physical or emotional pains that are present in every pregnancy—more so, than those who did not struggle with conceiving previously and are judged for being ungrateful. These women used the YouTube platform to normalize such feelings—feelings that are often overlooked in the trying to conceive journey. Our work argues that technologies should acknowledge the difficult and often invisible emotion work of trying to conceive and pregnancy.

Related Work

Within HCI, there has been substantial research that has explored parenthood. New parents are also utilizing social media to seek, share, and affirm their roles as parents. Research has explored how technology can help mothers in finding health information that reaffirmed their actions [4,7,8]. Ammari and Schoenebeck [2] examined how new fathers used social media and found that while mothers used social media as a way to validate their mothering, fathers used social media as a way to learn how to be a good father. The authors found that some fathers—often, single fathers—would refrain from sharing via social media because of their self-image and how others might perceive them. Although many of these studies brought up some tensions in parenthood such as the tension between posting intimate information (e.g., photos) and privacy [1], there has been less work that has focused on how people (hopeful parents, parents-to-be, and new parents) face and deal with emotional factors such as guilt and judgment. Most closely related to our work, Hiniker et al. [5] found that parents who used mobile phones while caring for their child sometimes felt parental guilt. The authors describe models of caregiver behaviors that may provide insight into future design possibilities. While their work concentrates on guilt of technology use when caring for their child, our study examines the guilt and judgment that hopeful mothers and mothers-to-be can face.

Methods

We wanted to ensure that we received a broad perspective on women's journeys when trying to conceive (TTC) and during their pregnancy. We wanted to understand the experiences of women transitioning from trying to conceive to becoming pregnant.

Data Collection

We used YouTube's default search engine by using "ttc vlog" as our search term. We set a filter of videos posted within the past year as part of a larger study and received 187,000 filtered results. We selected channels that had both *trying to conceive (TTC)* and *pregnancy* vlogs from these results—channels had to have at least one of both types of videos. From this search, we selected 12 channels that fell into our inclusion criteria. We then searched "ttc pregnancy vlog" with a filter of videos posted within the past year where we received 116,000 filtered results. Our data collection had a total of 446 videos and 9,199 comments across 16 different channels. Videos were selected if they included key terms related to trying to conceive or pregnancy.

Analysis

We used a grounded theory approach with open and axial coding to create an initial coding scheme. The codebook was iteratively developed. We coded all 16 channels (446 videos) and their subsequent comments. Our analysis identified emergent and relevant themes from our data such as "disapproval/judging," "feeling guilty," and "therapy" that formed the basis of our theory on the phenomenon of vlogging about TTC and pregnancy—that women in this situation use the YouTube platform as a way to talk about guilt and judgment (as they felt and perceived it) for not only community and self-therapy, but as a way of advocacy.

Results

Through our analysis, we found that women who are trying to conceive or are pregnant often spoke about guilt and judgment. For them, these were two distinct feelings, where guilt was conceived internally and

judgment was projected onto them by others. While guilt was more prevalent for the women in our dataset who were trying to conceive, both women who were trying to conceive and were pregnant felt judgment. We also found that these women developed various solutions in an attempt to mitigate these feelings.

Collectively, we refer to women who are trying to conceive and are pregnant as "TTCers"—a term that they use themselves—because they all went through the TTC journey. Those who were pregnant still understood what it was like trying to conceive. We used pseudonyms throughout for each woman in our paper. We denote "V[ID.video number]" when the quotation came from the video (e.g., "V-1.1" for the first video of the first channel) and "C-ID.video number" when the quotation came from the comments (e.g., "C-1.1" for a comment on the first video of the first channel).

Inner Guilt

TTCers often faced feelings of guilt. Much of this guilt was internal, where they felt that they were not a complete woman for facing infertility issues or felt guilty that they were jealous of a friend's ability to TTCers' sense of guilt often translated into a responsibility to conceive, making them feel like less of a woman. These feelings were often related to guilt for another person—guilt for their other child or for their partner. For example, Rachel had a child from a previous relationship. As she began documenting her experiences with trying to conceive, she always included a description that asked viewers to "*cross your fingers [that] we can give our little [child] the sibling she deserves*" (V-1.1).

TTCer's Guilt in Not Being Able to Conceive

I don't feel like a complete woman because I can't bear children anymore, and I'm like, "why am I here?"? I can't give my husband a child, I can't give my son a sibling. (V-3.38)

It's very much an issue with me. That's hard to take as well especially because I had a baby due to preeclampsia so early, I feel so guilty, like I can't get it right, you know? I had to have two caesareans. (V-8.1)

Defense from Judgment

I feel like when you're pregnant and subsequently raise a child, people think they know what's better for you and take advantage by forcing unsolicited advice if they get the slightest hint you are going against the "norm". They seem to forget that everyone has a right to experience parenthood in their way and each baby is unique to his/her parent. (C-15.20)

More so, TTCers talked about how the fact that they were unable to conceive somehow made them feel incomplete. Diana, who already had a son, spoke about how she had been struggling to conceive a child for six years after giving birth to her son.

Even when a TTCer had given birth previously, the inability to conceive now made them feel like it was an indication of failure on their part. For example, Eva blamed herself for the issues that she and her husband were having in conceiving a third child, stating that it was because she had prior caesareans.

External Judgment

When sharing their journey of trying to conceive or pregnancy, be it with friends and families or with strangers on a public platform such as YouTube, TTCers essentially opened up their lives and allowed the general public to be privy to an intimate part of who they are and their relationship with their partner, often leading to judgment of their choices and lifestyle.

Differences in opinions often created controversial conversations between TTCers and other people. Michelle had decided not to take a three-hour glucose test. When she discussed her decision to not do any further testing with others, other TTCers accused her of not caring about her baby's health. The "right to experience parenthood in their way" was often a contentious point of discussion for many. TTCers knew that they should not care about others' opinions but were still incredibly hurt by the allegations that they did not care about their baby when many of them had spent years trying to conceive.

Within the TTC community, there was an unspoken expectation of sensitivity. For some, it was expected that those who became pregnant would be sensitive about their experiences and opinions to those who were still having trouble conceiving. For example, some viewers were unhappy that Nancy discussed how much she wanted to conceive a third child. They felt that this was insensitive to her viewers who had been following her for years but were still unable to conceive. When Nancy became pregnant with her third child, she posted multiple videos of home pregnancy tests to confirm that she truly was pregnant, causing viewers to angrily accuse her of not actually have fertility issues.

However, there were others in the TTC community who opposed these types of disparagement, saying that others should not try to make them feel guilty about wanting another child. These TTCers felt that dealing with infertility issues was a constant challenge, not something that went away once they had a baby. TTCers struggled with what was right and wrong—while they realized that talking about a successful pregnancy could be hurtful for others still trying to conceive, they also felt that they should be able to openly celebrate their pregnancy after trying so hard to conceive.

Acceptance and Mitigation

TTCers, though faced with feelings of guilt and judgment, often developed strategies that helped in mitigating these feelings. They received and gave social support in the community, used faith and religion as a source of support, and became an advocate for speaking out against judgment.

Many TTCers felt like outsiders due to the invisibility of struggling with infertility issues and in a society where

women, in part, are often defined by their ability to conceive [6]. TTCers mentioned that YouTube was a way to "*know that I don't really have to go through this alone*" (V-15.5) and to find similar people who understood them (V-14.42). More so, TTCers believed the community to be free of the judgment that they typically faced from those who did not understand their experiences. It was especially comforting for them to be able to find solace in women going through similar experiences when they felt unable to express how they truly felt to other people. For TTCers, it wasn't just being able to talk and share about their experiences. It was also being able to see and understand what other women were going through, confirming that they were not alone in their feelings and experiences.

Support in TTC Communities

Victor, you are my biggest inspiration. I'm an FTM transgender. My family are strict Christian Samoans but watching your videos helped me address my lifestyle with them. I showed them your videos and they completely understood me and the way I've been feeling (I would always choke when I tried to explain my feelings about being transgender so showing your videos to them was like my voice). Thank you. (C-13.8)

In a way, many TTCers used the YouTube platform as a place for advocacy—to recognize and acknowledge the hardships of trying to conceive and to being pregnant, to bring awareness to postpartum depression, and to recognize issues in trying to conceive in a non-traditional relationship. Yvonne outlined the guilt she felt when dealing with postpartum depression. She felt that there was a need to tell her story, regardless of how painful it was to bring up those emotions again, to normalize postpartum depression as something that could happen to anyone. One viewer appreciated her doing this as it was a way for her (as someone who did not go through postpartum depression) to understand what it felt like. (C-6.19).

TTCers in non-traditional relationships used the publicness of YouTube as a way to discuss social issues as well. Victor, a female-to-male transgender, dedicated a video on why he would tell his child that he is transgender. To Victor, this was not only a matter of

advocacy for others in non-traditional relationships but as a record for his future child to understand his experiences in his personal life and in his TTC journey (V-13.8). Though one of his purposes of the video was to create an open discussion about his experiences, he was also able to successfully inspire someone else.

Discussion

Beyond documenting their experiences and interacting with others, TTCers used the platform as a way to be advocates of not only issues with infertility but to acknowledge the feelings of guilt and judgment. Research in HCI has not focused on these feelings of though they are prevalent in various populations such as people with chronic illnesses. We discuss research directions to support TTCers and to consider how technologies can take in account the sometimes invisible feelings of guilt and judgment.

The topic of guilt and judgment pervaded many of the TTC videos and comments. TTCers discussed feeling guilty about not being able to conceive or how they should not feel jealous if someone got pregnant. Their opinions and actions were highly scrutinized by their social network and strangers watching their videos.

TTCers had various mitigation strategies when facing guilt and judgment and appropriated technologies to reconcile these feelings. However, this does not necessarily mean that technologies should be designed to mitigate the mismatch of how TTCers felt versus how others felt TTCers *should* feel. Similar to Carroll et al.'s [3] work that argues against deficit-driven design (designing to specifically mitigate the issues from deficits such as decline in cognitive abilities due to age), we postulate that technologies should openly

acknowledge and bring forth these types of feelings, such as guilt and judgment. Rather than shying away from these mismatches, researchers can begin to unpack what it means for technologies to conspicuously bring forth these issues. Shame and guilt are natural emotions to feel, and in fact, TTCers felt a need to make these emotions public for good reason—they are often hidden and seen as taboo, forcing their emotion work to become a burden for TTCers to bare alone rather than something to be shared and sympathized with. Future research directions should consider that these emotions, like sadness or guilt, themselves may have therapeutic purposes.

Conclusion

Beyond the physiological aspect of trying to conceive and pregnancy, there is an emotional part as well. Women who are trying to conceive or have gotten pregnant face feelings of guilt about having trouble conceiving. They are also subject to external judgment from other people, which can add to their own feelings of guilt. By examining the ways in which TTCers utilize technology, specifically the YouTube platform, as a way to mitigate these feelings, we can begin to understand how we might design technologies that acknowledge, normalize, and bring forth the sometimes invisible emotion work that TTCers may go through.

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