

THE IMPACT OF PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING ON  
PARENTING STRESS LEVELS OF SINGLE MOTHERS

By

Djuana Ann Tomlin

Hinsdale Bernard  
Professor  
(Chair)

Deborah McAllister  
Professor  
(Committee Member)

Cheryl Robinson  
Professor  
(Committee Member)

M. D. Roblyer  
External Examiner  
(Committee Member)

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the University of  
Tennessee at Chattanooga in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements of the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
Chattanooga, Tennessee

December 2014

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## ABSTRACT

The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) estimated that there were 15.2 million female householders with no husband present. Many single mothers experience a high level of stress due to feelings of isolation and alienation from friends and family and having to deal with social, economic, and personal issues alone. This study evaluated the impact of participation in a social network site (SNS) on the stress levels of single mothers for the purpose of using updated resources to replicate and expand upon the initial work of Dunham et al. (1998).

This study sought to answer the following research questions: Does participation in an SNS decrease mothers' stress levels? Does increasing participation time in an SNS have a positive impact on the mothers' stress levels? Do participants report decreased levels of social isolation as a result of participation in a SNS? 4) What themes are reflected in the content analysis of the blog posts in the SNS?

A total of 30 single mothers were selected to participate in this study through the use of snowball sampling (Berg, 2007). Participants were volunteers who were recruited through local organizations in the Chattanooga area.

This study utilized a one-group, pre-post design and mixed-methods data collection and supported the findings from the original study. A *t* test was used to compare the pre-post test results for Research Questions 1 and 3. Bivariate correlation was used to analyze Research Question 2. Qualitative data were collected with Research Question 4 through the use of

participants' responses to three blog questions. Participants were able to access the SNS for a period of 21 days.

This study supported the original findings that mothers were most likely to report a decreased level of stress through the use of SNSs. However, there was no relationship between the time the mothers devoted to the SNS and a change in their stress levels. The isolation subscale showed a major difference in the participants feeling socially isolated on all items. A content analysis of the weekly blog questions showed that the participants provided and received encouragement, while over half said money was a huge stressor.

## DEDICATION

I would first like to dedicate this dissertation to God, from whom all blessings flow. For with Him all things are possible. Thank You for being the Head of my life!

I would also like to dedicate my research to my children: Ricky, DeKarlos, and JeDon. It is so tough being a single mother having to handle all the household responsibilities alone. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for being so patient with me, even during those times I was unable to spend quality time with you. This journey has been long and hard, but we're here! My prayer is that God will repay us double for the time we lost by me working, attending classes, and having to study. I hope you can understand that I did all of this for us...to better our lives. I love you guys to infinity and beyond!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express sincere gratitude to my mother, Eva Jones, and my best friend, Charise Bailey. Thank you so much for always supporting me, encouraging me, and believing in me. I am so blessed to have you both in my life!

My deepest thanks and appreciation to Dr. Peggy Roblyer and Dr. Hinsdale Bernard for your time, support, and contributions throughout this journey. You both have been committed, understanding, and amazing to work with. To say “thank you” for your knowledge and guidance just isn’t enough, but thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything!

I also want to thank my other committee members, Dr. Cheryl Robinson, and Dr. Deborah McAlister, for your time and help to make my research better. I truly appreciate you!

To the single mothers who participated in this study, I could not have done this without you. Please continue to hold your heads up, stay strong, and be encouraged. The struggle is real!

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview of the Study

The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) estimated that there were 15.2 million female householders with no husband present and of these, 8.5 million female householders have biological children under 18 years old residing with them. High rates of distress among this population of single mothers have been documented, and numerous studies have been conducted to understand better the reasons for this phenomenon. Studies have pointed to common stressful life circumstances such as ongoing financial problems (Heller, 2005; Peden, Rayens, Hall, & Grant, 2004) feelings of isolation and alienation from friends and family (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Rajaratnam, O'Campo, Caughy, & Muntaner, 2008; Webber & Boromeo, 2005), and demands and pressures of parenting alone (Heller, 2005; Jackson, 1999; Lipman & Boyle, 2005). In the first research of its kind, Dunham et al. (1998) studied how computer-based social networking can serve to alleviate some of the feelings of isolation common to this group. Today, popular social network sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Twitter are frequently used to help people connect and support each other. The purpose of this study is to use updated computer resources to replicate and expand upon the initial work of Dunham et al. (1998).

This study measured the impact of participation in a SNS on the parenting stress levels of single mothers. A group of 30 participants was asked to participate in a SNS for 21 days. This

chapter provides background on the problem, describes the theoretical framework, explains the purpose of the study, and presents the research questions that guide the study.

### **Background to the Problem**

There is substantial literature to document that stress is associated with parenting roles, and that this stress is greatest for single parents. “Single parents’ lives are composed of social conditions and experiences that can culminate in states of chronic stress” (Johner, 2007, p. 89). Compared with mothers in two-parent families, single mothers experience higher levels of depression and family stress, and lower levels of social support and access to mental health services. A 2-year prospective study performed by Brown & Moran (1997), reported that single mothers were at a greater risk of experiencing a period of chronic depression lasting a year or more than were married mothers. According to Peden, Rayens, Hall, and Grant (2004), psychiatric symptoms such as clinical depression can increase the stress of single mothers and hinder not only their ability to parent but also to access community services that could help them.

Webber and Boromeo (2005) conducted a study on 10 single parents and their support networks. They reported that the participants often experienced feelings of isolation, rejection, and distress, and received their most emotional and practical support from friends and family. It was also documented that receiving support was crucial for them to cope effectively. They reported that many single mothers experience a high level of stress due to feelings of isolation and alienation from their friends and family, as well as from pressure to provide for their children with very little assistance. Most single mothers do not have the support system in place that is often present in two-parent families. As the sole-parent, they usually have to deal with the stressors on their own, often with limited resources. Agencies that are set up to provide

assistance are each restricted in what they can do to address the multiple problems of these mothers, who must go to several different agencies to obtain the assistance they need. Added to the stress of their situation are emotions of embarrassment and shame. All of these characteristics make it difficult to cope well with the demands of being a single provider.

Dunham et al. (1998) studied the impact of what was then called a "computer-mediated social support community" on relieving the stress associated with parenting roles. A group of 42 single mothers with young infants participated in a 6-month study in the Halifax, Ontario metropolitan area. Each participant received a computer in their home that was equipped with a social support network site on parenting issues that operated 24 hours a day. The virtual community allowed information to be shared among participants as they interrelate, attempting to reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness believed to be characteristics of this group. The *Parenting Stress Index* was administered to measure the mothers' stress levels before and after participation in the social network. Fundamental goals of the study were:

1. To determine if this particular groups of young women would use this resource to deal with the many challenges they face every day as single parents,
2. To describe the nature of their interactions in this novel environment; and
3. To determine whether participation in a CMSS would be associated with changes in the level of parenting stress observed in this family system (pp. 284-285).

The findings revealed that the 42 mothers accessed the site over 16,670 times during the study. A total of 1,454 messages were posted that received a total of 3,838 replies; therefore, each mother received an average of 89.45 replies, of which 97.9% of the replies offered some kind of positive support. It was also reported that the more the participants accessed the virtual social support community, the stronger their sense of belonging and the more likely they were to report reduced levels of parenting stress following the intervention.

Modern technology makes it possible for people in similar situations to reach out to and support each other. SNSs such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Tagged, and Twitter are exceptionally popular. Some researchers have claimed that online interactions may supplement or replace in-person interactions, mitigating any loss from time spent online (Wellman et al., 1996). According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2011), the Internet is increasingly being used more for social interaction and promotes deeper social connections. One report (Rainie, Lenhart, Fox, Spooner, & Horrigan, 2000) revealed that the use of email and the Internet improved women's connections with family and friends. Compared to sporadic Internet users, those who dedicated themselves to log on more frequently stated that email "...brought them closer to their families; they have learned a lot about their families; and that they have started communicating regularly with a family member whom they had not contacted much before" (p. 21). The purpose of this study is to explore how the capabilities of SNSs may address parenting stress levels faced by single mothers. These women experience a high level of stress due to feelings of isolation and alienation from their friends and family, as well as the pressure to provide for their children with very little assistance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study uses a theoretical foundation developed from the literature on the impact of social isolation. The study hypothesizes that decreasing feelings of social isolation will also decrease parental stress. Several studies document the finding that single mothers experience a high level of stress partially due to feelings of isolation and alienation from their friends and family. These individuals without social connections may encounter adverse physiological and health outcomes. In a comparison study of 61 mothers, Telleen, Herzog, and Kilbane (1989)

reported a decrease in social isolation and an increase in social support after participating in a three month-long, two-component family support program: parent education and mothers' support group. The study also documented a substantial decline in parenting stress as a result of participation in the program.

The literature on this topic also suggests that social isolation and loneliness are linked to mental health problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, and depression (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Morse & Furst, 1982; Turner, 2006), or possibly becoming victims of abuse or being the abuser themselves (Roberts & Pless, 1995). Studies often found that the risks of social isolation were associated with the risks of cigarette smoking (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Human connection and the need for social support are basic human needs (Durkheim, 1951; Murray, 1938) that are essential for our well-being. Attachment, which is an emotional bond to another, has been studied by many theorists. John Bowlby was the first attachment theorist. Bowlby's (1969, 1988) Theory of Attachment postulated that babies have an innate need to be attached to others (the so called "main attachment figure"). If this need goes unmet (maternal deprivation) during the critical first two years of a child's life, it could result in the child having long-term cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties on into adulthood. Children who encounter confusing, frightening, or broken emotional communications often grow into adults who find it hard to understand their feelings for self and other, which can limit them from building and maintaining healthy, successful relationships (1988).

Humans are highly social beings. Family, friends, and intimate relationships get many people through the highs and lows of life. Many studies have shown that the healthiest, happiest people tend to be more grounded in their communities (Heller, 2005; Rankin & Quane, 2000). In

1970, Abraham Maslow introduced his Hierarchy of Needs and Motivation Theory presented in a five-level pyramid. He posited that social needs are the first level of higher needs. After lower-level, physiological and safety needs have been successfully met, a desire will emerge to gratify the “unsatisfied hunger for contact, for intimacy, for belongingness and the need to overcome the widespread feelings of alienation, aloneness, strangeness, and loneliness” (1970, p. 44). Maslow further stated that “Any good society must satisfy this need, one way or another, if it is to survive and be healthy” (1970, p. 44). Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010) reported that “we rely on connections with others and our collective abilities to communicate, remember, plan and work together to survive and thrive in a world where individual prowess is vastly insufficient for the task. It is no surprise, therefore, that our health also depends on our sense of connectedness with one another” (p. 416).

For this study, it is important to understand that the needs for attachment, belongingness and love are interrelated. For example, a single mother may meet the lower needs (eating, drinking, sleeping, and safety); however, just because the need is met does not mean that it or the stress from it disappears. The worries and concerns associated with providing for a family alone are continuous, repetitive, and always changing over time as new issues arise. Although the conditions are still the same, providing the mothers an outlet, in the form of an online platform, allows them the opportunity to form bonds (attachment), to provide/receive support from others with similar experiences (love), and develop a sense of community (belongingness). Bowlby’s Theory of Attachment and Maslow’s Hierarchy both revealed that these needs are essential for human survival and well-being. Children who are securely attached as infants tend to be more independent and have successful social relationships. This guides later interactions with people. The virtual community allowed information to be shared among participants as they interrelate,

attempting to reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness believed to be characteristics of this group (Dunham et al., 1998).

The following two diagrams, *Figure 1.1* and *Figure 1.2*, illustrate the impact that the two variables, social isolation and parental stress, have on the sub-variables when a single mother does not have an outlet for communication available and when she does have one available.

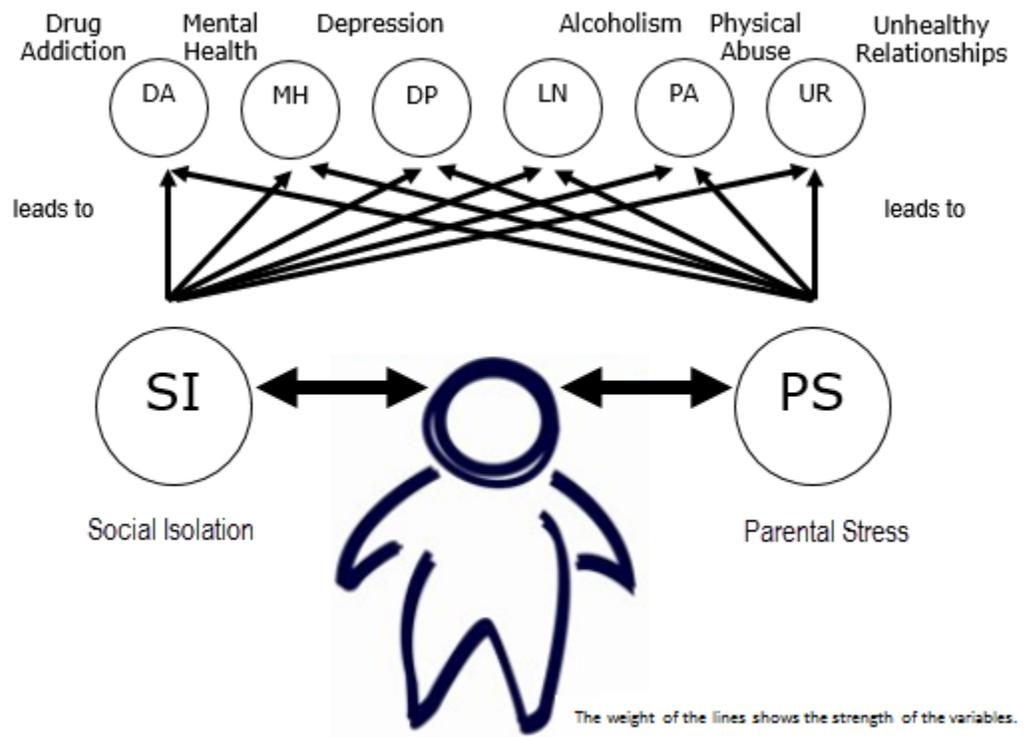


Figure 1.1 Single mother with no communication outlet.

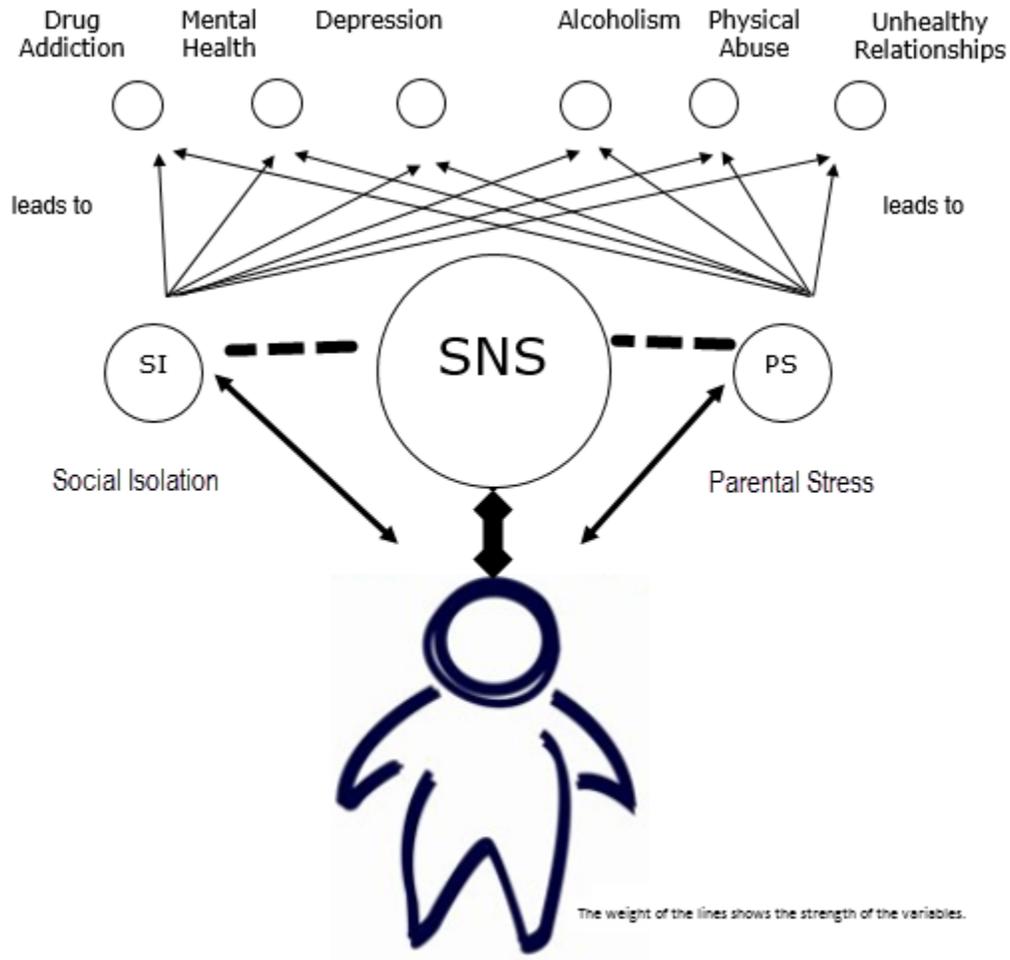


Figure 1.2 Single mother with an available communication outlet.

### Purpose of the Study

The number of adults who utilize SNSs has grown significantly over the last several years. “In May 2008, 54% of adults with a social networking site profile had a profile on just one site, while 29% had profiles on two sites and 13% had profiles on three or more sites” (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010, p. 18). Many people now access the Internet and SNSs using their cell phone, game consoles, and portable gaming devices, as well as their home desktop or

laptop computer, making anytime computer access increasingly available to them. The purpose of this study was to use these updated resources to replicate and expand upon the initial work of Dunham et al. (1998).

A SNS was created that provided a single communication platform and support mechanisms for a group of single mothers in the local community to reduce the social isolation that accompanies being a single parent. The original measuring tool validated by Dunham et al., the *Parenting Stress Index*, was used to measure the stress levels of single mothers both before and after their participation in the SNS. Participants' activities were tracked and their messages coded to provide more insight on how the system supports them. It is hypothesized the mothers' stress levels will decrease and they will reflect a more positive outlook on their parenting abilities as a result of reducing their social isolation.

### **Research Questions and Related Hypotheses**

This study explored the capability of an SNS to address parenting stress levels faced by single mothers. With the purpose of providing data on the problem, this study addressed the following research questions to add to our knowledge in this area.

#### **Research Question 1**

The study first sought to answer the question, “Does participation in an SNS decrease mothers’ stress levels?” This research question was derived from the original study conducted by Dunham et al. (1998). Mothers who participated in the 60-day intervention were more likely to report a decreased level of stress following the intervention. The objective was to find out if the current study validated the initial findings and has contributed updated findings to the research

literature. For the purpose of this study, the formal statement of this question is: “Is there a significant difference between pretest and posttest scores on the *Parenting Stress Index* of single mothers who participate in a SNS that is designed to support them?”

Hypothesis 1: Single mothers who participate in the SNS will experience a significant decrease in parental stress levels.

## **Research Question 2**

Second, the study sought to answer the question, “Does increasing participation time in an SNS have a positive impact on the mothers’ stress levels?” This question investigated the impact of single mothers’ participation in an SNS. Studies have shown that online users reported increased satisfaction and closer ties with network members when the SNSs were accessed more frequently (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011; Lea & Spears, 1992; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Wright, 2000). It is hypothesized that the more time the mothers participate in the SNS, the greater will be the decrease in the parenting stress levels. If results are positive, they will show a significant difference in the pretest and posttest scores on the *Parenting Stress Index* of single mothers who spent a great deal of time on the SNS. Dunham et al. (1998) reported that the more the participants accessed the virtual social support community, the stronger their sense of belonging and the more likely they were to report reduced levels of parenting stress following the intervention. The formal statement of this research question is: “Do pretest and posttest scores of single mothers’ levels of parenting stress, as measured by the *Parenting Stress Index*, significantly differ based on the amount of participation time in a SNS?” The findings may also add useful, updated information to the research literature.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a significant correlation between the amount of time single mothers spend participating in the SNS and parenting stress levels.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question asks, “Do participants report decreased levels of social isolation as a result of participation in a SNS?” This question was derived from a review of the literature. According to some researchers, online communication may render the same effects as face-to-face communication and thus, can supplement or replace the support that many single mothers need (Wellman et al., 1996). The objective is to find out if participation in an online social community will help alleviate the single mother’s feelings of isolation and alienation from family and friends by connecting and providing these individuals with a forum to give and receive support from others who are in similar situations. Rainie, Lenhart, Fox, Spooner, & Horrigan (2000) reported that the Internet is increasingly being used for social interactions and that this use promotes deeper social connections. The formal version of this research question is: “Is there a significant difference between pretest and posttest scores on the social isolation measure of the *Parenting Stress Index* of single mothers who participate in a SNS that is designed to support them?”

Hypothesis 3: Single mothers will experience decreased levels of social isolation from participating in the SNS.

### **Research Question 4**

Finally this study asks, “What themes are reflected in the content analysis of the blog posts in the SNS?” The objective of this question is to determine if there are certain words,

phrases, or themes within the participants postings. This will help to provide insight to the mothers' attitudes and behaviors to lone parenting.

The goal of the SNS is to provide single mothers with a platform to receive social support to enhance the quality of their parenting experience. The formal statement of this question is: "What communication themes of the group blog postings in the SNS designed to support them are derived from a content analysis?" No hypotheses were tested for this question.

### **Rationale**

For the purpose of this study, it was important to understand whether participation in an online social network would reduce the parenting stress levels of single mothers whose social development may have been undermined by strong feelings of isolation and alienation from their peers. There are limited resources, support systems, and positive outlets for single mothers to be able to connect with others who share the same experiences. This examination of the capability of an SNS to address parenting stress levels faced by single mothers was essential because it could provide evidence that an online social support community can be as effective as face-to-face communication. A large motivation for the study was the history of experiences the researcher shares with the study population.

### **Significance of the Study**

For women who are the head of their household, support and resources can be imperative to their family's success. Before any preparation was performed to begin mapping this study, it became evident that the family structure has drastically changed. Over a 30-year period, the number of female householders with no husband present had increased by half of the households

in the United States alone (Lerman & Ratcliffe, 2001). The upsurge in the divorce rate is a contributor to the change in the family structure. According to Dr. Scott Stanley (2001) of The University of Denver, of all marriages that take place, 50% of them end in divorce. The number of single-parent households has increased over the years. This study examined the impact of participation in online social networking on parenting stress levels of single mothers. It was important to increase society's knowledge on the stressors these women experience that can be brought on by the pressures of their multiple roles and various responsibilities. This study could help society to better understand the pressure and stressors that single mothers have to endure as a lone parent. Also, it could serve as a tool to educate professionals to shed some light on the strain many single mothers experience on a daily basis. The findings could provide essential information to policymakers to make changes and/or set into place funding to provide more resources and support for single mothers, as well as promote future studies.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The following is a list of terms that will be used throughout this study:

**Single mother:** A woman who is divorced, widowed, or never married and cares for her children alone.

**Social isolation:** The absence of contact and interaction with family and friends; lack of emotional and material support from others resulting in feelings of alienation (Roberts & Pless, 1995).

**Social network:** A network of support that consists of family, friends, co-workers, church members, and neighborhoods, who provide emotional and physical support.

Social Network Site (SNS): “A website that provides a virtual community for people to share their daily activities with family and friends, or to share their interest in a particular topic, or to increase their circle of acquaintances”

(<http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/55316/social-networking-site>).

Support system: “Information leading the subject to believe that she is cared for and loved, esteemed and a member of a network of mutual obligations ... resources provided by others” (Roberts & Pless, 1995).

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to use updated resources to replicate and expand upon the initial work of Dunham et al. A SNS was created that provided a single communication and support mechanisms for a group of single mothers in the local community. The original measuring tool, the *Parenting Stress Index*, was used to measure the parenting stress levels of single mothers both before and after their participation in the SNS.

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Does participation in an SNS decrease mothers' stress levels?
2. Does increasing time in an SNS have a positive impact on the mothers' stress levels?
3. Do participants report decreased levels of social isolation as a result of participation in a SNS?
4. What themes are reflected in the content analysis of the blog posts in the SNS?

It is hypothesized that the mothers' stress levels will decrease and they will reflect a more positive outlook on their parenting abilities as a result of reducing their social isolation.

The following chapters will provide an in-depth review of the literature, describe the study methodology, explain results from the study, and provide a discussion of the implications of the findings.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Overview of Literature**

Chapter 1 described some of the life circumstances many single mothers have to face on a daily basis and posited that social networking can lessen the isolation these circumstances cause and, consequently, the stress levels associated with this isolation. The study proposed here seeks to explore this phenomenon by gathering data to address four research questions:

1. Does participation in an SNS decrease mothers' stress levels?
2. Does the increasing time in an SNS have a positive impact on the mothers' stress levels?
3. Do participants report decreased levels of social isolation as a result of participation in a SNS?
4. What themes are reflected in the content analysis of the blog posts in the SNS?

Several kinds of literature provide a foundation for this study's focus and methods. These include studies on various kinds of stresses experienced by single parents; causes and effects of social isolation; strategies to reduce parenting stress; background on the growing uses of SNSs; and finally, the use of SNSs to fulfill the role of social networks for single parents.

## **Studies of Stress and Parenting**

Stress is a phenomenon that has been studied over numerous centuries. In 1936, Hans Hugo Bruno Selye, known as the father of the stress field, introduced the term to medicine in his published works on the *stress syndrome*. It is because of his work that this term is understood as it is today. In 1984, Lazarus and Folkman introduced a new definition for stress as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (p. 19).

Stress is evident in every area of life: family, home, work, etc. Whether it is experienced in a demanding situation or life, everyone encounters stress in some form. Single mothers often experience excessive stress as a result of juggling multiple roles with little to no help. It is no wonder that as the sole provider for their household, these women often are overwhelmed as they strive to carry out everyday responsibilities that have traditionally been shared by a husband and wife. A review of the literature shows that many single mothers report that their greatest stressors are economic hardship, childcare, and parenting alone. Lennon, Blome, & English (2002) reported in a study where 33 inner-city, poor single mothers were surveyed that child-rearing and child-caring were the areas they experienced their greatest stress. It was revealed that participants who had no support system, were of low income, or were unemployed were the most likely to show symptoms of depression

### **Economic hardship**

Economic strain is probably one of the biggest challenges that single mothers have to face. “In 2010, 31.6 % of households headed by single women were poor, while households headed by single men were 15.8 % of households headed by single men and 6.2 % of

married-couple households lived in poverty” (<http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/>, para. 11). Peden, Rayens, Hall, and Grant (2004) revealed that financial hardship could increase the stress of single mothers and lead to both depression and chronic episodes. The onset of these psychiatric symptoms could cause these women to display ineffective and potentially harmful parenting skills (Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, & Glassman, 2000). The children of these women suffering with depression endure unfavorable effects such as behavioral problems and future clinical depression (Rajaratnam et al., 2008).

With the introduction of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, welfare recipients found themselves having to enter the workforce for the first time. For many single mothers this seemed difficult, if not impossible, especially for those depending solely on a high school diploma to obtain employment. According to Lerman (2001), single mothers make up 13% of the less educated segment of the workforce with a high school diploma or less. It is possible that once these women secure work, they incur additional expenses, because low-wage jobs do not afford women-headed families enough money to purchase adequate housing, food, health care, child care, and other basic necessities. This often leaves some experts wondering if these women were better off on welfare (Hill, Burdette, Regnerus, & Angel, 2008).

Unfortunately, financial stress not only affects the single mother, but her family as a whole, both directly and indirectly. Her child’s health, cognitive skills, and socialization are all intertwined with the mother’s income. Limited funds can pose a barrier to a family’s ability to access suitable healthcare (Turner, 2006). Since many single mothers are unable to receive benefits (medical, dental, mental health, or other specialized services) through their employer, because it is not offered or too expensive, many children living in poverty are in danger of

chronic conditions (2003). In 2010, 16.4 million children, or 22.0%, were poor and living in poverty (<http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/>). Disadvantaged families are most likely to have poor availability and access to healthcare, inefficient transportation, and no flexibility within their job to attend to needs of their children. (2003; Turner, 2006).

According to the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan, households headed by single mothers have the highest rate of poverty, especially African American or Hispanic. Research shows that the economic pressures of these single mothers can also have an indirect impact on the child's development. A study conducted by Jackson et al. (2000) reported that "money does seem to matter both for mothers' psychological functioning and child developmental outcomes" (p. 1418). The 93 single black mothers were employed in low-paying jobs. The mothers' preschool children exhibited learning disabilities and other behavior problems. The findings support the literature that a mother's financial strain is indirectly associated with the children's development. For a poor family, the purchase of educational tools is less likely to be a priority for a single mother with money problems. As a result, "their children's cognitive skills are lower, leading to lower levels of completed school; therefore their children's achievement level correlated with their income level" (Hill et al., 2008, p. 3). With the economic hardship these women face on a daily basis, it is no wonder they must make hard choices about how their money is spent when it comes to providing for their families.

## **Childcare**

With economic hardship already a point of stress, single mothers new to labor force participation are faced with the challenge of finding, keeping, and paying for childcare on a limited income. There are women that are entering the workforce into lower paying jobs, which make it difficult for most families to rise above the poverty level due to having to use half her wages to pay for childcare. In a study conducted by Wijnberg and Reding (1999), a mother stated that 55% of her income went towards daycare, while the other 45% was used to pay bills and purchase groceries.

In 2011, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that of the 34.5 million families with children under 18, the percent of mothers working or looking for work was 70.8%. Single mothers entering the workforce into low-paying jobs may find that insufficient childcare options can potentially be an employment barrier. Since changes to the federal and state policy limiting families' access to welfare and encouraging financial self-sufficiency, there has been a growing need for childcare facilities. "Despite some public subsidies, access to high-quality child care is inadequate in this country, and such care generally is available only to those who are able to pay higher fees" (2003, p. 1552). Unless a poor family has a support system already in place, they may have to rely on in-home sitters, which may not prove reliable or safe. One mother reported, "I had a problem with my baby-sitter just up and quitting and not telling me until the day I took them there. Then I am like, what am I going to do?" (M. H. Wijnberg & Reding, 1999, p. 512).

With the strain of childcare already an issue, many single mothers experience an innate struggle between being a working mother and a stay at home mom. Although society supports women staying home to care for their small children, it is the middle class who are favored to be stay at home mothers, while women living in poverty are expected to go to work (Hill et al.,

2008; Pediatrics, 2003). This double-standard can cause low-income single mothers to feel frustrated, helpless, and angry. Although welfare reform requires recipients to obtain employment within 2-years of applying for benefits and sets a five-year cap on benefits over a lifetime, it offers limited assistance for childcare. A mother's inability to make a balance between dual roles may often lead to behaviors to avoid employment all together adding to the tremendous strain she is already undergoing (M.H. Wijnberg & Weinger, 1998).

### **Parenting Alone**

From 1960 to 1990, there was a steady increase of single parent homes in the United States. Some experts would agree that the traditional family is on the decline due to the rise of single parent households and other family structures. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated in 2009 alone that there were more than 19.5 million single parent households, of which 74% (14.5 million) of the total were headed by a female with no husband present. One reason for the increase is partly due to the rise in the divorce rate in America. Whether by choice or circumstance (i.e., divorced, widowed, or never married) parenting alone can be a huge stressor for a single mother.

Raising children can be rewarding, but parenting alone can add insurmountable strain on a mother already trying to maintain childcare in order to work and handle the family's economic problems. A lack of financial support from the noncustodial father can intensify the mother's economic strain. Many fathers who make the decision to end the relationship and move out of the family's home may turn their backs on their children and refuse to provide any financial assistance. With numerous fathers evading their parental responsibilities, government agencies are working to help mothers to receive child support by aiding in the establishment of paternity

of the children. Wijnberg and Reding (1999) reported that 42% of the 33 single mothers participating in their study received child support, but most of the fathers were unreliable leaving the children upset. Studies show that children raised by a single mother have significant increases in risk for a variety of problems, such as school related health problems, emotional and behavioral problems, and psychiatric and social problems (Hall-Lande et al., 2007; Hill et al., 2008; 2003; M. H. Wijnberg & Reding, 1999), which can produce distress and fatigue for the mother, thus increasing her level of stress. Regardless of the reason the father decides to leave his family, the mother is often left behind to care for the children, alone and isolated from support systems.

A nonexistent father means “the absence of a consistent source of physical and emotional support for the mother” (2003, p. 1550). When there is not another adult present to share in parenting duties, a mother lacks quality time to carry out household and child-rearing tasks. The children’s behavior are at risk of growing increasingly challenging and mother-child interactions strained due to the mother’s overwhelming feelings of caring for the children alone. For a single mother, disciplining her children can become another major source of stress. In Wijnberg & Reding’s (1999) study, participants revealed several key points of stress when it came to disciplining their children: 1) “conflicts between the mother and noncustodial father over household rules; 2) lingering resentments of the partners toward each other that were played out by fathers being over indulgent with the children; 3) the mothers conflicted use of physical punishment” (pp. 510-11).

## **Research on Causes and Effects of Social Isolation**

Social isolation is the absence of connections, interactions, and relationships with family and friends and can affect all aspects of a mother's life. It is one of the most critical social consequences of single parent families. There are numerous factors that can cause the onset of social isolation, such as economic hardship, mental health, and neighborhood characteristics.

### **Economic Hardship**

A review of the literature revealed that many single mothers identified a shortage of money as a major cause for them being socially isolated (Lipman et al., 2010; Reid & Ponio, 2004; Turner, 2006). Economic hardship can have harmful effects on parental mental functioning and family relationships. A lack of funds could quarantine many single mothers because they don't have extra money to socialize. A mother unable to have periods outside of the home for alone time, going out with friends, or taking children on family outings can result in low self-esteem, helplessness, or the mothers seeing their worlds becoming smaller. In a study of 205 low-income single mothers, "negative thinking mediated the relationship between self-esteem and depressive symptoms and partially mediated the relationship between chronic stressors and depressive symptoms" (Peden et al., 2004, p. 344). In another study, one mother explained, "I don't have friends, so therefore I don't have anyone who can babysit for me. So therefore, I don't go out. I don't have money for recreation, so I don't get to go out...the social isolation comes from the financial situation and the stress that comes along with that" (Reid & Ponio, 2004, p. 2). This can lead one to believe that a socially isolated mother could often stay home for days or even weeks without contacting or being contacted by another adult which could possibly result in a sense of powerlessness and a loss of identity.

## **Mental Health**

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about 17 million Americans suffer from depression, and more than half of them are women ([www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)). A lone mother's mental health can lead to social isolation. Many may find it difficult to leave their homes due to stress, low self-esteem, and the many symptoms of depression, such as being excessively self-critical, lack of energy, change in sleep patterns, and highly agitated behavior. Several studies validate the finding that single mothers experience a high level of stress partially due to feelings of isolation and alienation from their friends and family (Jackson, 1999; Lennon, Blome, & English, 2002). Literature revealed that socially isolated women reported on average 73% more depressive symptoms than women who were not socially isolated (Rajaratnam et al., 2008). A study conducted by Hudson, Elek, and Campbell-Grossman (2000) reported that depression can be correlated with increased feelings of loneliness and decreased social support. The mere perception of social isolation (loneliness) is sufficient to incur adverse physiological and health outcomes, such as obesity (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010), drug or alcohol dependency (Hall-Lande et al., 2007; Morse & Furst, 1982; Turner, 2006), risks of cigarette smoking (House et al., 1988), and possibly becoming victims of abuse or being the abuser themselves (Roberts & Pless, 1995). Nevertheless, without the availability and accessibility to quality healthcare and mental health facilities, it is impossible for single mothers to receive the help they need to reduce their feelings of depression and loneliness.

## **Neighborhood Characteristics**

Finally, neighborhood characteristics can also lead to social isolation. A lack of trust and the fear of being victimized can cause many single mothers to avoid social contact in their

neighborhoods outside of close family and friends (Rankin & Quane, 2000). Many single mothers isolate themselves and their children to shield them from the effects of the devastation in their residing environment. In a study conducted on 261 Baltimore city mothers with young children, Rajaratnam et al (2007) confirmed that the effect of social isolation on a woman's depressive symptoms varies depending on the neighborhood in which she and her family lives. A single mother who is already dealing with economic hardship and living in an impoverished neighborhood is doubly disadvantaged and "often lacks contact with persons with the knowledge, experience, and most important, the valuable social connections to aid them in their efforts to improve their life circumstances" (Rankin & Quane, 2000, p. 141). "The increased anxiety paired with a sense of not being able to remove oneself from a threatening environment may lead to a sense of helplessness, despair and greater depressive symptoms" (Rajaratnam et al., 2008, p. 472). The more isolated a single mother becomes, the more excluded and powerless she may feel and less likely to engage in her community.

One of the most negative effects of social isolation is the increased risk of childhood injuries. Mothers without emotional and material support from others may feel alienated, depressed and ultimately less concerned about the safety of their child (Roberts & Pless, 1995). Wijnberg and Reding (1999) surveyed 33 poor rural single mothers in the areas of child-rearing and child-caring. They found that the mothers viewed their highest satisfactions and encountered their greatest stressors in these two areas. The mothers reported that they often felt isolated and yearned for companionship, such as a friend to talk with, another parent who could relate to similar experiences, or a boyfriend. The participants with no support system, low income, or unemployed, were the most likely to show symptoms of depression. Researchers observed that parental depression could lead to child neglect or abuse and undermined almost every key aspect

of parenting. “Socially isolated families are more likely to have values and beliefs that are discordant with their community’s values, more likely to feel alienated, and less likely to adopt conventional child-rearing practices and health habits. They are more likely to abuse their children” (2003, p. 1555).

### **Research on Strategies for Reducing Parenting Stress**

Stress reduction is a growing concern for many Americans due to the impact of terrorism, natural disasters, and the poor economy. Educating oneself about stress and reduction options is probably one of the best coping and managing strategies. Learning about this growing epidemic is important for many because if left untreated, stress can cause heart attacks, strokes, death, certain cancers, many other diseases. The American Institute of Stress estimates that “75-90 of visits to primary care physicians are for stress induced complaints, many of which can be alleviated by appropriate stress reduction techniques” (<http://www.anxietycentre.com/stress.shtml>, para. 5).

Stress is the body’s natural physiological and emotional reaction to an internal or external stimulus (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Everyone experiences it at some point in their life. Stress can be short-lived or long-term depending upon the situation the person is dealing with (e.g., being late for an appointment or the death of a loved one). Morse and Furst (1982) offered three components of the stress concept derivative from Selye’s research. They include: stressors, individual makeup, and stress response. Stressors are the physical, psychological, or social dynamics that cause the onset of stress, such as: trauma, noise, anxiety, fear, employment termination, or death of a loved one. Second, individual makeup is the way in which an individual reacts to stressors. It will vary based on their personalities, traits and attitudes, genetic

factors, and environmental conditions. Finally, stress response is the physiological and psychological way the body reacts to coming in contact with the stressor, for example breathing rapidly, sweating, trembling, or fatigue. These reactions stem from the body pumping out major stress hormones: cortisone, adrenaline, and noradrenaline. The subsequent body of literature shows that there are numerous strategies to aid with coping and reducing stress. Consultation, religiosity, social support, and self-help are a few resources that people can seek to learn how to deal with stress. In a study conducted by Coles (2009), participants noted that the strategies they utilized to reduce or cope with stress were formal counseling, spiritual support, and public assistance. Many of them indicated that certain strategies were evaded because of limited availability and avoidance of stereotyping. In addition to consultation, religious beliefs, and social support, a vast number of self-help resources (i.e., books, websites, and television) are available to help people learn how to deal with stress.

### **Consultation**

Since the times of Sigmund Freud, philosophers have studied human behavior, whether from a psychoanalytic or behavioral approach, in order to gain an understanding of how individuals' "the way in which people's agendas interact with the demands and opportunities of their social environment" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 339). Regardless of the approach, one of the goals of therapy is to "teach the specific failures of logic that are responsible for the distress or poor functioning for which help is sought and to help the person think more constructively" (p. 341).

The National Institute of Mental Health reported that depression, anxiety, and many psychiatric disorders associated with stress are more prevalent in females than males

([www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)). For many single mothers, stress can be so overwhelming that personal coping methods are not enough and outside assistance needs to be sought. A private consultation with a therapist may be helpful in dealing with minor stressors as well as with the effects of major life stress events (Morse & Furst, 1982). A professional can provide extra support and guidance to diminish and disengage from insecure thoughts, and access natural positive feelings that can help these mothers to reduce their stress levels. Some physicians prescribe drugs as a part of therapy; however, it is not always necessary. There are a variety of options for professional consultation, including one-on-one therapy, group therapy, family therapy, and behavior modification. “Women are more inclined to seek professional consultation at a much higher rate than men” (p. 379).

Mental health experts utilize numerous models and strategies to help patients cope, manage, or overcome stress-related issues. The Person-Situation Interaction Model of Stress Reduction (Hancock, 1999) contends that stress occurs when one identifies the demands of a situation to be greater than her means to satisfy those demands. With single parenting, a mother feels stressed not because she creates the stress, but because of her perception of home demands and her personal ability. Therefore, to apply the Person-Situation Interaction Model of Stress Reduction to decrease the onset and negative effects of stress, the mother, with the help of an expert, may come up with strategies to change the dynamics in her home. The stress reduction strategies are categorized into three groups: demand-related, capability-related, and response-related.

## **Demand-Related Strategies**

The goal of this type of strategy is to alter the mother's perception of the demands of the situation to bring them more in line with her capabilities (Hancock, 1999). One demand-related strategy to help a mother overwhelmed with household chores is to share the responsibilities with her children. Simple tasks, such as picking up toys, putting away shoes, wiping tables, etc. could be given to the children to complete on a daily basis. Assigning the children with chores could give them a sense of responsibility while possibly decreasing the mother's stress.

Another demand-related strategy that could help a mother struggling with time management is to develop a schedule/chart of the family's daily activities, including time and duration of each activity. A family timetable and an adjustment in the family's daily schedule may help the family to become more organized and develop a smoother evening routine that may allow them to accomplish more (Hancock, 1999).

## **Capability-Related Strategies**

The goal of this strategy is similar to demand-related, which is to bring a balance between the perceived demands and capabilities (Hancock, 1999). One capability-related strategy to meet this goal may be for a mother to enroll and attend community-based education programs to increase her perception of skills and resources. Many local organizations, community recreation centers, and neighborhood churches offer classes on nutrition, budgeting, parenting, and job-seeking skills.

Another capability-related strategy to help a mother achieve a balance between perceived demands and capabilities may be to identify (Hobfoll, 1986; Morse & Furst, 1982) and monitor situations (Hancock, 1999) in which stress is most likely to occur. If the mother could become

aware of how her body reacts when coming into contact with the stressor and notating details about the situation and her symptoms -- for example breathing rapidly, sweating, trembling, or fatigue -- this could help her to avoid another encounter or better prepare for the next encounter to reduce the amount of stress. If a mother experiences anxiety and increased heart rate because she is fearful of being late for work, the mother could leave 15 minutes earlier or take another route to alleviate her nervousness. Diet and exercise are also good strategies to cope with stress (Morse & Furst, 1982).

### **Response-Related Strategies**

The goal of this strategy is to help the mother cope with the onset of stress from the imbalance between demands and capabilities (Hancock, 1999). There are several response-related strategies for a mother struggling with social isolation due to economic hardships. First, she and her family could go for a walk together. This is an excellent way to get out of the house without spending any money and is a good source of exercise. Second, a couple of families could pull together their resources (food already on hand in their refrigerators and/or cupboards) for a dinner. Family members could share the responsibilities of preparing, cooking, and serving a meal, as well as cleaning up after dinner. A picnic or grilling out is a good way for everyone to get out of the house and spend quality time together.

A final strategy to help a single mother find a balance between demands and capabilities is a daily diversion. This down-time allows the mother to escape her daily routine and responsibilities of motherhood (i.e., reading a book, taking a long bath, enjoying a cup of tea, listening to music, etc.). “Daily diversions are essential if one is to be able to successfully cope

with stress on a daily basis...and is especially true for women who have the double burden of a family and career” (Morse & Furst, 1982, pp. 430-431).

### **Religious Beliefs**

There are many positive benefits that religion and spiritual practices can have on one’s health and well-being. Religious faiths discourage self-indulgent behaviors and promote balance in everything. Spiritual and religious practices carried out on a daily basis, such as meditating, saying daily prayers, and fasting can help provide encouragement and lift the spirits of an extremely stressed lone mother (Hill et al., 2008). A study conducted by Berkman and Syme (1979) on 7,000 participants discovered that highly socially-isolated people with hardly any social ties with others had the greatest risk of death. A church or religious community offers a diverse group of individuals from various generations that can provide a strong sense of connection and can have a positive impact on the lives of families and children (2003). They provide support and help to reduce stress in people’s lives. Another study conducted on 2,402 low-income mothers showed that those who regularly attended religious services had greater parental satisfaction, saw fewer parental demands, and reported less parental distress than mothers who did not attend regularly (Hill et al., 2008). There are other advantages for a family with a female head to attend and become members of a religious based social group. These groups provide rules for living, and they nurture and care for their members. Attending worship services, bible study, or prayer meetings are positive examples of breaking up a monotonous routine and the demands of daily life, as well as promote positive feelings and well-being.

## **Social Support**

Social support is a resource that has been found to have positive outcomes for both psychological and physical health (Heller, 2005), stress reduction (Hobfoll, 1986; Morse & Furst, 1982), greater self-esteem, a sense of control, and reduce social isolation (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). A network of support could consist of family, friends, church members, or co-workers, all of whom can provide love, assistance, and inspiration. This kind of emotional support can help to boost one's self-esteem and -worth, which may ultimately reduce stress. Research has shown that single-parent families who chose to utilize a network of support see noticeable results. A small qualitative study (Webber & Boromeo, 2005) conducted on 10 single parents and their support network showed that friends and family played a significant part in helping them to cope with the stress of parenting alone and in their personal well-being.

A strategy that psychologists have experimented with and suggest to reduce stress is self-disclosure. Self-disclosure involves the practice of being willing to express one's thoughts and feelings about a stressful event or situation (Larsen, 2000). Many experts believe that keeping things "bottled up" can be harmful and ultimately may lead to psychological distress and disease. They contend that being able to open up to discuss personal feelings may promote coping. A trusted family member, friend, or co-worker would be someone ideal to speak freely with. It would be advantageous to look for someone who has undergone the same/similar experiences as they could offer encouragement and advice. Community programs offering social support and education may serve as an important resource for stress reduction.

## **Uses of Non-computer Social Networks to Support Single Parents**

The literature indicates that women living in poverty, who develop relationships, locate someone whom they can trust. These women “exchange emotional and material support through non-formal education programs are more likely to experience multiple psychosocial and material benefits” (Prins et al., 2009, p. 337). Non-computer social networks, such as community-based programs, educational groups, and community organizations offer a social space to share advice, release emotions, recreation, and an escape to a monotonous routine, which may have a positive effect on stress reduction (Hobfoll, 1986). Lipman and Boyle (2005) conducted a study on 116 low-income mothers. They reported that after the mother participated in the 10-week, community-based program of group sessions, they saw significant improvements in the mothers’ moods and an increased self-esteem. Many programs are designed to positively impact single mothers and provide an environment where connections among participants can be developed and strengthened. In a study of women in poverty, participation in a family literacy program gave them the opportunity to get out of the house, develop caring friendships with teachers and peers, and pursue personal development and discovery (Prins et al., 2009). The program helped the low-income women to receive social support and improve their psychosocial well-being.

Many community-based programs offer nurturing, effective social interactions that could possibly create empowering experiences. Some programs are unique and provide individual services for both the parent and the child. Another study conducted on families headed by women (Lipman et al., 2010) reported that as a result of the mothers participating in the community-based education/support group program, they saw improvements related to support from other mothers, self-esteem, parenting skills, increased communication with children, and feelings that other mothers understood in their situation. Community-based programs allow

participants to learn from one another, and as a result, participants learn they are not alone from hearing and listening to others.

In recent decades, community organizations have implemented programs to improve family living. Many of these programs focus on education, skill-building, and empowerment within the core family. *Families First* (<http://www.families-first.org>) is a national organization that offers, through the use of collaborative partnerships, parenting education workshops and life skills training to strengthen the family. Parents and guardians gain valuable information such as a greater understanding of their children, effective communication tools, job skills, and a network of social support that allows them the opportunity to relate with other parents who understand what they're feeling and experiencing.

Another organization is a collaborative non-formal education program created and funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) known as The University of Tennessee and Tennessee State University Extension Services – Hamilton County (<https://utextension.tennessee.edu/hamilton/Pages/default.aspx>). The mission of the program is to work together with the individuals and families in Hamilton County to solve problems within their environment. Extension offers research-based programs in the areas of 4-H Youth Development, Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), Family and Consumer Sciences (Tennessee Saves Program), and Horticultural (Master Gardeners Program). The Extension Program trains and empowers local citizens and community leaders to promote positive changes in their neighborhoods and communities.

## **SNS Background and Uses in Society**

As the literature has shown, community-based programs, educational groups, and community organizations may have a positive effect on the reduction of stress. Since the introduction of the Internet in the early 1990s, its role has expanded beyond a resource to locate research and educational data. Lenhart et al. (2010) reported that the Internet has become a “central and indispensable element” in the lives of Americans young and old (para. 5). The Internet serves a plethora of functions, including sending or receiving emails, obtaining driving directions, watching movies, shopping, obtaining an education, and social networking.

Over the past several years, there has been a rapid increase in the popularity of social network sites. An SNS is a website that provides a virtual community for people to share their daily “activities with family and friends, to share their interests in a particular topic”, or to increase their circle of acquaintances ([www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia](http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia), para. 1). Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) explained that SNSs can take on a variety of styles, such as dating sites, professional networking sites, friend-networking sites, or promotional sites for businesses, entertainers, and politicians. Members of SNSs are able to create a profile page, generate a friends list, post and view statuses, and share personal information, including pictures and interests, as well as attach links to other profiles. These online platforms offer members a space to meet and connect with others.

### **SNS Background**

SNSs were introduced on the Internet during the mid-1990s. Some of the earlier versions of an SNS include TheGlobe.com, Geocities, and Tripod (Ahmad, 2011). These online communities provided people the opportunity to connect and share personal information via chat

rooms. By the end of the 1990s, more innovative sites were being developed that would allow members to find and manage friend lists. According to Ahmad (2011), in 1997, the first social networking platform, SixDegree.com was launched. SixDegree.com paved the way for today's SNSs, such as MySpace, Friendster, LinkedIn, Facebook, Ning, and Twitter. Facebook is the most widely used social networking site (Hampton et al., 2011) with an estimated 845 million users ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)).

The Pew Internet & American Life Project (2011) reported that American adult membership on at least one SNS has almost doubled since 2008. In 2009, it was reported in a study that more than two-thirds of the global online population visited and participated in social networks and blogs (Benevenuto, Rodrigues, Cha, & Almeida, 2009). Some of the reasons that may be attributed to the rapid increase in SNS memberships over the past several years are: (a) reduction in costs for people to communicate, such as long distance telephone bills or postage; (b) costs less in time spent, allowing them to cultivate many more relationships; (c) removes geography challenges, as geography is no longer an obstacle to making and maintaining connections; and (d) allows for open information sharing (Anderson & Rainie, 2010). Membership in these online platforms has had an impact on both personal and professional relationships (2010).

### **SNS Uses in Society**

The Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that “65% of online adults use social networking sites (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/08/26/65-of-online-adults-use-social-networking-sites/>, para. 1)”. There are many reasons why people choose to use SNSs. The uses and gratification theory (U&G Theory) posits that “different people use the same media

messages for different purposes to satisfy their psychological and social needs and achieve their goals” (Sheldon, 2008, p. 40). Rubin (2002) reported that research which has applied the U&G Theory generally concentrated on how media was utilized by audiences to satisfy the need for personal identity, escape, and self-presentation. Several studies (LaRose & Matthew, 2004; Leung, 2007) conducted on the U&G Theory in relation to SNSs found the major uses and satisfaction of members to be: relationships, entertainment, and information. These components will structure the main topics for research in the following literature.

### **SNSs and Relationships**

When applying the U&G model to SNSs, the social component is probably the most important element. Roughly two thirds of social media users reported their motivation for using these sites is to stay in touch with current friends and family members, “while half say that connecting with old friends they’ve lost touch with is a major reason behind their use of these technologies” (Smith, 2011, p. 2). SNSs provide an easy and convenient way to communicate and maintain relationships with others without being face-to-face. Research by Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, and Purcell (2011) found that the average SNS user “is less likely to report having no discussion confidants (7%), and they tend to have more close ties (average of 2.27) than non-internet users (15% of non-internet users have no close ties, and they average 1.75 discussion partners). SNS users are even less likely to be socially isolated; only 5% report having no discussion confidants, with an average 2.45 close ties” (Hampton et al., 2011, p. 24).

Urista, Dong, and Day (2009) conducted focus groups with 50 undergraduate students in Central California explaining why they used MySpace and Facebook through the U&G Theory. The study revealed that the students used SNSs to fulfill both their personal and interpersonal

desires. Members reported they benefited from the ease of access, efficiency, and popularity these vehicles offer them to communicate with others and obtain information.

### **SNSs and Information Location**

With the wealth of data the Internet has to offer, it is no wonder that SNS members may find gratification when searching for information online. Individuals can learn about upcoming events, people they meet (Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009), the business environment and products, seek job prospects (Agarwal & Mital, 2009), and partake in formal discussions. The Pew Internet & American Life Project (2006) found that roughly 60 million Americans stated that the Internet was an important resource in helping them to make a major life decision. In a survey of 2,201 adults age 18 and older, Rainie, Horrigan, Wellman and Boase (2006) reported that 34% of the respondents received advice and support from others; 28% reported that they were able to connect and receive information from experts or professional services; and 30% reported being able to obtain information to compare options, for example when purchasing a car. Hudson, Elek & Campbell-Grossman (2000) conducted a pilot study of The New Parents Project showing that expectant adolescent, single mothers were able to receive information related to motherhood and social support from discussion groups. The computer-mediated online community connected the women with a medical professional via email that otherwise would have been a challenge.

### **SNS and Entertainment**

Many SNS members seeking to fulfill leisure and amusement needs can receive entertainment gratification through the digital world. Besides desktop and laptop computers, there is an assortment of devices that can access the Internet to satisfy people's needs for

entertainment, such as wireless devices, gaming consoles, mp3 players, e-book readers/tablet computers, and smartphones. In a study conducted by Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley (2010), one female SNS member stated that she enjoyed looking at other people's pictures and videos as a source of fun. The Pew Internet & American Life Project (2011) reported that 8 in 10 smartphone owners use their phone to go online, to share photos or videos with others, and other activities, such as downloading apps, watching videos, and accessing SNSs.

Two social media sites that have seen a growth in popularity during the last several years are YouTube and Twitter. Rainie (2008) revealed that the number of visitors to video-sharing sites such as YouTube has doubled in 1 year. In a study where the U&G Theory Model was applied, Haridakis and Hanson (2009) learned that socially-active, young men utilized YouTube to fulfill entertainment needs, for example thrill- and information-seeking. YouTube allows its members to interact and socialize through entertainment. In 2012, roughly 15% of online adults used Twitter, which was up from 8% in 2009 ([www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org)). One in 10 African-American social media users (10%) and 11% of Latinos say that connecting with and following public figures (politicians, parishioners, celebrities or athletes) on Twitter is a main motive for joining the site (Smith, 2011).

### **Summary of Literature**

Research shows that parental stress especially among single mothers represents a profound problem which must be addressed in order to promote healthy families, engage parents in leadership roles, and prevent child abuse and neglect. If a single mother endures long periods of stress, it may lead to social isolation and depression. If left untreated, depression can result in stress-related disorders, such as obesity, alcoholism or drug addiction, or suicide. The ability to

manage and reduce stress is essential when trying to live a balanced life, with work, children, finances, and relaxation. There is an abundance of strategies and resources to help one learn how to manage and cope with stress, such as consultation, religiosity, social support, community-based educational programs, and online social networking. “Social networking websites have transformed the virtual encounters of the past that were technical and impersonal to today’s virtual socialization that is truly nontechnical, social, and interpersonal” (Agarwal & Mital, 2009, p. 105).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Overview of Study Methodology

The present study measured the impact of participation in a social network on the parenting stress levels of single mothers. The purpose of this study was to use updated resources to replicate and expand upon the initial work of Dunham et al. (1998). A SNS was created to provide a social support platform for a group of single mothers in the local community. The original measuring tool, the *Parenting Stress Index*, was updated and administered before and after SNS participation to measure the mothers' stress levels. The following are the research questions the study sought to answer and the hypotheses tested.

1. Does participation in an SNS decrease mothers' stress levels?

Hypothesis 1: Single mothers who participate in the SNS will experience a decrease in parental stress levels.

2. Does the increasing time in an SNS have a positive impact on the mothers' stress levels?

Hypothesis 2: The more time single mothers participate in the SNS, the greater will be the decrease in the parenting stress levels.

3. Do participants report decreased levels of social isolation as a result of participation in a SNS?

Hypothesis 3: Single mothers will experience decreased levels of social isolation from participating in the SNS.

4. What themes are reflected in the content analysis of the blog posts in the SNS?

No hypotheses were tested for this question.

This chapter explains the study design, methodology, and data collection and analysis procedures.

### **Study Design**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection to examine the impact of participation in a social network on the parenting stress levels of single mothers. The quantitative component was a one-group pretest/posttest, pre-experimental design. Although the validity of pre-experimental designs is often questioned (Babbie, 2013), a benefit of this design is the inclusion of a pretest to determine baseline scores. For the study, administering the *Parenting Index Stress* pretest helped to provide evidence of the changes that took place within the group as a result of participating in a SNS that was designed to support them.

The qualitative portion consisted of a content analysis of participant blog postings to determine if there were certain words, phrases, or themes within the participants' postings. While the volume of data yielded by this method makes analysis and interpretation time-consuming, "...qualitative research provides a means of accessing unquantifiable facts about the actual people researchers observe..." (2007, p. 8). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research methods are not totally dependent upon sample sizes. It is possible to produce significant results with a small sample population.

## **Setting**

This study took place in Hamilton County, Tennessee which is located in Southeast Tennessee near the Georgia border. Hamilton County, Tennessee is centrally situated between Knoxville, Nashville (Tennessee), Atlanta (Georgia), and Birmingham (Alabama). Its county seat is the metropolitan city of Chattanooga. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), Hamilton County has a total population of 336,463 residents. The community racial statistics are represented as follow: Caucasian (73.9%), African-American (20.2%), American Indian and Alaska Native (0.3%), Asian (1.8%), Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (0.1%), some other race (2.0%), and 2 or more races (1.7%).

## **Participants**

A snowball sampling method (Berg, 2007) was used to meet the sample size. Snowball sampling consists of respondents recruiting other respondents to participate in the research due to the level of difficulty in identifying and reaching the desired population. Single mothers interested in participating in the study were asked to recommend other single mothers who met the requirement to take part in the study. Participants were volunteers that were recruited through advertisements from local organizations in the Chattanooga area.

In order to participate in this study, the women had to meet certain eligibility requirements. The participants had to be at least 21 years old, single (divorced, widowed, or never married), the head of their household with at least one school-aged child living in the home, access to a computer, and a minimum high school education. This was required to ensure the mothers' ability to read, write, and communicate with other participants. A total of 30 single mothers were selected to participate in this study through the use of snowball sampling.

## Materials and Instruments

A single data collection instrument was used for this study, the original measuring tool, the *Parenting Stress Index* (PSI, see Appendix A). It was updated and administered pretest and posttest to measure the mothers' stress levels. This instrument answered the first three research questions. A content analysis of the blog posts was conducted to identify communication themes of the group. This research tool was used to answer research question 4.

The *PSI* is a 120-item questionnaire developed by Dr. Richard R. Abidin. It was designed from the concepts of the determinants of dysfunctional parenting. The instrument is made up of two scales. There is the parent domain made up of seven-subscales: competence (CO), isolation (IS), attachment (AT), health (HE), role restriction (RO), depression (DP), and spouse (SP). Next, is the child domain with six subscales (distractibility/hyperactivity, adaptability, reinforces parent, demandingness, mood, and acceptability). The range for correlation coefficients is -1.00 to +1.00, with .50 or larger showing a strong relationship between two variables (Urdan, 2005). The coefficients were calculated from the normative sample responses varied from .70-.84 Child Domain (CD) and from .70-.84 Parent Domain (PD). The reliability coefficient was .90 or larger for both domains and the Total Stress scale. A cross-cultural validation of the instrument was conducted by Hauenstein et al. in 1987. The alpha reliability coefficient for the Parent Domain was .92 and the subscales were .78 (DP), .62 (AT), .79 (RO), .72 (CO), .78 (IS), .78 (SP), and .57 (HE).

Evidence of the PSIs reliability was established through the test-retest from four different studies. A clinical sampling of 30 mothers being seen in a group pediatrics practice for child behavior was conducted to test-retest reliability of PSI. One to 3months after initial testing, the mothers were retested. The Child Domain reliability correlation coefficient was .63, the Parent

Domain reliability correlation coefficient was .91, and the Total Stress reliability correlation was .96 (Abidin, 1995).

Construct validity of the PSI was established through a series of studies. A study conducted on 201 high-risk urban mothers and newborns “examined factors most predictive of current stress as a means of assessing the risk of child maltreatment” (Abidin, 1995, p. 46). The greatest predictors to cause the onset of stress were the number of reliable people in the mother’s life and the number of family members the mother has a close relationship with and see on a regular basis. Although, the Maternal Social Support Index was utilized, some of the scales had a negative correlation with the PSI Life Stress score. There was a correlation with PD low scores and good social support and a correlation with CD high scores and low frequency of satisfactory ongoing relationship. “This is consistent with interpreting social support as a buffer in coping with life stresses” (p. 47).

### **Study Procedures**

In order to ensure quality and efficiency of the main study, a pilot study was conducted with a total of 10 respondents. The pilot study revealed discrepancies in the original design. This allowed for materials and procedures to be modified as needed before administering the actual study. The pilot study helped to increase recruitment efforts by spreading the word about the research throughout the community.

Through the use of snowball sampling, the researcher sought assistance from local religious, educational, and social service agencies to recruit 30 single mothers. In the event the required number of participants was exceeded, a drawing would have been held to randomly select the single mothers. A representative from each organization received basic information

about the study to share with potential participants via a flyer that was posted in a public area. In order to maintain confidentiality and allow participants to be as honest as possible, a group orientation and training session was not held. Individuals who expressed interest in the study and met the eligibility requirements were emailed a consent form. Since the consent form was the only identifiable information about the participants, an informed consent was used when the women logged into the site and completed the PSI pretest. Out of respect and safety for all attendees, vulgar language, threats of physical harm or fighting were not tolerated and could have resulted in the participant being released from the study. Participants created an online user name instead of using their own name in the SNS. It was left up to the single mothers as to how much personal information they wanted to share with others.

For this study, the researcher developed a SNS. Participants received a password to access the site. The SNS provided a single form of social communication through the use of a blog. Participants were able to interact with one another by asking questions, providing answers, and offering comments on a community forum. The researcher only interacted with participants to monitor and guide postings. An initial question was posed to encourage a new discussion each week. For example, the researcher asked, “As a single mother, do you find it difficult to date someone new other than your child’s father? What are some dating challenges you have had to face? How did you handle or overcome these challenges? Do you have any tips for other single mothers new to the dating scene?” Participants who took part in the full 21-day study were entered into a drawing to win a \$100 gift card from Wal-Mart. The gift card was mailed to the winner.

The original measuring tool, the *Parenting Stress Index*, was administered online in a pretest/posttest approach to measure improvement in stress levels. The PSI was offered during a

certain timeframe and participants were allowed to access it only one time once the testing window was opened. Participants were able to access the SNS for a period of 21 days. All activities were tracked and the participants' messages were coded to provide more insight to the participant's attitudes and behaviors to lone parenting.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Methods**

To address Research Questions 1 and 3, survey data were analyzed by using a paired *t* test to compare parenting stress and levels of social isolation before and after the SNS participation. *T* tests are used to compare the means of two samples to learn if there was a significant difference between them (Urdu, 2005). Research Question 2 was addressed by using a bivariate correlation to determine the relationship between the two variables, time spent in the SNS and the change in *PSI* scores. Bivariate correlation is utilized when an assumption has been made that two variables are related (2005). For this study, the hypothesis that as the frequency of the participants spent in the SNS increases, the single mothers' levels of parenting stress would decrease. Research Question 4 was analyzed by using a content analysis using a constant comparison technique to determine common themes in responses (Berg, 2007).

### **Study Limitations and Assumptions**

This study made several assumptions about procedures and data collected. First, the study assumed the participants would respectfully complete all SNS activities and answer the interview questions honestly. Second, participants were volunteers who learned about the study from advertisements through various local institutions and agencies. The sample size was small and

would require replication with a larger sample, so findings were not generalized to all single mothers.

Study generalizability to other situations was limited by several factors in addition to small sample size. There may have been trust issues among the participants that made responses unreliable. The mothers may have had a fear of appearing vulnerable and found it difficult to open up to one another if their identities were revealed. Therefore, in order to maintain confidentiality, a formal orientation and training session was not held and the mothers created and utilized user names for all site activities. Conversely, there was the possibility that allowing participants to employ their real names would result in some mothers fabricating their responses. Also, it was considered that outside factors (e.g., an argument with a boyfriend, friend, or loved one; being concerned about meeting a basic need; or a behavioral issue with a child) would have an effect on how the participants answer the *PSI* questions and may have prevented them from completing the total 21 days to attend to pressing family matters. However, all these characteristics could more than likely be true for other populations and, thus, typical of all such women in similar circumstances.

### **Summary of Study Methodology**

This study utilized a one-group; pre-post design and mixed-methods data collection to determine the quality and usefulness of SNSs for single mothers and the impact of SNS uses on parenting stress. Using a snowball sampling, 30 mothers were selected to participate in the study. The *Parenting Stress Index*, created by Abidin (1995) provided quantitative data to answer Research Questions 1 through 3. A *t* test was used to compare the pre-post test results for Research Questions 1 and 3. Bivariate correlation was used to analyze Research Question 2

assuming that the more time the participants spent in the SNS there would be a decrease in the single mothers' levels of parenting stress. Qualitative data were collected with Research Question 4 through the use of participants' responses to questions posted in the SNS.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Summary of the Study

The study evaluated the impact of participation in a social network on the parenting stress levels of single mothers. The purpose of the study was to use updated resources to replicate and expand upon the initial work of Dunham et al. (1998). The study employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection. A SNS was created that provided a single communication platform through the use of a blog. A content analysis of the blog posts was conducted to identify communication themes of the group. All activities were tracked, and participants' messages were coded to provide more insight to the participants' attitudes and behaviors to single parenting. The quantitative component was a one-group pretest/posttest, pre-experimental design utilizing the original measuring tool, the *Parenting Stress Index*. The following are the research questions the study sought to answer and the hypotheses tested.

1. Does participation in an SNS decrease mothers' stress levels?

Hypothesis 1: Single mothers who participate in the SNS will experience a decrease in parental stress levels.

2. Does the increasing time in an SNS have a positive impact on the mothers' stress levels?

Hypothesis 2: The more time single mothers participate in the SNS, the greater will be the decrease in the mothers stress levels.

3. Do participants report decreased levels of social isolation as a result of participation in a SNS?

Hypothesis 3: Single mothers will experience decreased levels of social isolation from participating in the SNS.

4. What themes are reflected in the content analysis of the blog posts in the SNS?

No hypotheses were tested for this question.

Study findings are reported in this chapter. Results are provided as findings on each research question.

### **Description of the Sample**

For this study, the population from which the sample was derived consisted of single mothers. Participants were recruited through the use of snowball sampling with assistance from local religious, educational, and social service agencies. The participants had a combined total of 243 postings over the 3-week period in the SNS. Of the participants ( $n=27$ ) who took part in the study, 33% were divorced and 67% were never married. The ethnicity ratio is 26% white and 74% African-American. More than half of the sample of single mothers were employed, with 22% working part-time, 37% working full-time, and 41% not employed. Tables 4.1 - 4.4 include a summary and a complete description of the study participants' characteristics.

Table 4.1

Summary of Participants' Ages

Age	Frequency	Percentage
21-25	5	18.5
26-30	2	7.4
31-35	7	25.9
36-40	4	14.8
41+	9	33.3
Total	27	99.9

Table 4.2

Summary of Participants' Children

Number of children	Frequency	Percentage
1	14	51.9
2	3	11.1
3	5	18.5
4	1	3.7
5+	4	14.8
Total	27	100.0

Table 4.3

Summary of Participants' Income

Income	Frequency	Percentage
Less than \$10,000	7	25.9
\$10,000 – \$20,000	7	25.9
\$20,001 - \$30,000	9	33.3
\$30,001 – \$40,000	1	3.7
Rather not say	3	11.1
Total	27	99.9

Table 4.4

Summary of Participants' Education Level

Education	Frequency	Percentage
9 <sup>th</sup> to 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	8	29.6
Vocational or some college	10	37.0
College Graduate	8	29.6
Graduate or professional school	1	3.7
Total	27	99.9

## Research Question Results

### Research Question 1 Results

Research question 1 asks, “Does participation in an SNS decrease mothers’ stress levels?” This research question was obtained from the original study conducted by Dunham et al. (1998). Mothers who participated in the 60-day intervention were more likely to report a decreased level of stress following the intervention. This question focused on discovering if the current study validated the initial findings and contributed updated findings to the research literature. For the purpose of this study, the formal statement of this question is: “Is there a significant difference between pretest and posttest scores on the *Parenting Stress Index* of single mothers who participate in a SNS that is designed to support them?”

The null hypothesis states that there is no difference between pretest and posttest scores of the parenting domain subscale of depression. Participants’ responses were averaged and *t* tests were computed using the pretest and posttest scores of two parenting domain subscales: depression and role restriction. A paired-samples *t* test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in the stress levels of single mothers who participated in the SNS (Urdan, 2005). The null hypothesis was rejected for the overall subscale and for some of the individual items. For the depression subscale  $t(26) = -3.85, p = .001$ . The means and standard deviations of the individual items and the total parenting domain subscale scores are presented in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

Results of Paired t test of Pretest and Posttest Responses for Parenting Domain Subscale of Depression

Pair	Items	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig (2-tailed)
1	I feel guilty or bad about myself.	3.81	1.04	26	-3.05	.005**
		4.22	.64	26	-3.05	
2	I'm unhappy with my last purchase for myself.	3.67	1.27	26	-1.99	.057
		3.85	1.20	26	-1.99	
3	I feel responsible when my child misbehaves.	3.78	1.19	26	-1.62	.118
		4.07	.92	26	-1.62	
4	It's my fault when my child does something wrong.	3.78	1.12	26	-2.57	.016*
		4.26	.71	26	-2.57	
5	I feel guilty about the way I feel toward my child.	3.96	1.06	26	-3.89	.001**
		4.44	.76	26	-3.89	
6	Few things bother me about my life.	2.63	1.31	26	-1.15	.259
		2.81	1.21	26	-1.15	
7	I felt sadder and depressed after leaving the hospital.	3.67	1.39	26	.62	.542
		3.56	1.31	26	.62	
8	I feel guilty when I get angry at my child.	3.19	1.21	26	-3.53	.002**
		3.81	1.08	26	-3.53	
9	A month after bringing my child home, I was sadder and depressed than I had expected.	3.63	1.28	26	-.83	.416
		3.74	1.13	26	-.83	
10	Sum across scale	3.57	.72	26	-3.85	.001**
		3.86	.57			

\*\*  $p < .01$ . \*  $p < .05$

Table 4.6

Results of Paired t test of Pretest and Posttest Responses for Parenting Domain Subscale of Role Restriction

Pair	Items	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig (2-tailed)
1	Doing things for my child.	1.89	1.12	26	-.372	.713
		1.96	.98	26		
2	Giving up more of my life for my children.	2.07	1.11	26	-1.77	.088
		2.37	1.24	26		
3	Feel trapped by responsibilities.	3.74	1.02	26	-2.59	.015*
		4.11	.89	26		
4	My child's needs control my life.	2.78	1.12	26	-1.69	.103
		3.07	1.17	26		
5	I am unable to do new and different things.	2.89	1.34	26	-1.76	.090
		3.33	1.30	26		
6	I almost never do things I like to do.	3.11	1.34	26	-2.08	.048*
		3.48	1.31	26		
7	I have no place in my home to be alone.	3.67	1.52	26	-.40	.691
		3.56	1.36	26		
10	Sum across scale	2.77	.82	26	-2.53	.018*
		3.04	.76			

\*\*  $p < .01$ . \*  $p < .05$

In a comparison of the depression domain sums, using the alpha level of  $p < .01$ , there was a significant difference in the single mothers' pretest ( $M=3.57$ ,  $SD=.72$ ) and posttest ( $M=3.86$ ,  $SD=.57$ ) scores;  $t(26) = -3.85$ ,  $p = .001$ . When using the alpha level of  $p < .05$ , a comparison of the role restriction domain sums also showed a significant difference in the pretest ( $M=2.77$ ,  $SD=.82$ ) and posttest ( $M= 3.04$ ,  $SD= .76$ ) scores.

The overall subscale and the individual items that showed significant differences in Tables 4.5 and 4.6 suggest that the SNS allowed the women to offer and receive emotional comfort and support. Mothers who provided a lot of support to others tended to show an improvement in their perception of themselves, how they felt towards their children, and feeling trapped as a single parent. An examination of the 243 postings revealed that over half (63%) of the messages provided some kind of positive support, while 49 (20%) of the postings were about the mother's feelings toward herself and children, and a total of 34 (14%) of the postings addressed the mother's limitations in their responsibility as head of households. Participants who received a lot of support provided a great deal of support to others.

### **Research Question 2 Results**

Research question 2 asks, "Does the total participation time in an SNS have a positive impact on the mothers' stress levels?" This question investigated the impact of single mothers' participation in an SNS. Dunham et al. (1998) reported that the more the participants accessed the virtual social support community, the stronger their sense of belonging and the more likely they were to report reduced levels of parenting stress following the intervention. The formal statement of this research question is: "Do the differences in pretest and posttest scores of single mothers' levels of parenting stress, as measured by the *Parenting Stress Index*, significantly correlate based on the amount of participation time in a SNS?"

The null hypothesis is that there is no relationship between the time the mothers devoted to the SNS and their change in parental stress levels. A bivariate correlation was conducted to measure the relationship between the two variables, time spent in the SNS and difference in participants' scores on the three parenting domains (depression, role restriction, and isolation).

Since the researcher was unable to track the actual time single mothers spent in the SNS, a sum of the total number of participants' postings in the SNS was used. The number of postings ranged from 1 to 52, which averaged 10 postings per mother over a 3-week period. The participants' pretest and posttest scores were calculated for each parenting domain subscale: depression, role restriction, and isolation. The correlations between variables were not significant and the null hypothesis was retained. Pearson  $r$  scores for the subscales ranged from .144 (isolation) to .445 (role restriction). The results are listed in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7

Results of Bivariate Correlations across Parenting Domain Subscales

Domain Names	$r$	$p$
Depression	-.23	.215
Role Restriction	-.15	.445
Isolation	.29	.144

*Note.*  $n=27$ . Correlations are not significant at the  $p=.05$  level (2-tailed)

### Research Question 3 Results

The third research question asks, "Do participants report decreased levels of social isolation as a result of participation in a SNS?" This question was developed after a review of the literature. Wellman et al. (1996) reported that there are researchers who have reported that online communication may render the same effects as face-to-face communication and thus, can supplement or replace the support that many single mothers need. The question focused on determining if participation in an online social community would help alleviate single mothers' feelings of isolation and alienation from family and friends by connecting and providing these individuals with a forum to give and receive support from others who are in similar situations.

The study hypothesized that decreasing feelings of social isolation will also decrease parental stress. The formal version of this research question is: “Is there a significant difference between pretest and posttest scores on the social isolation measure of the *Parenting Stress Index* of single mothers who participate in a SNS that is designed to support them?”

The null hypothesis states that there is no difference between pretest and posttest scores of the parenting domain subscale of social isolation. A *t* test was used to compare the pretest and posttest scores of the social isolation domain. A paired samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate if there was a decrease in the stress levels of single mothers that participated in the SNS. The null hypothesis was rejected for the overall subscale and individual items. Each item showed a significant difference. In a comparison of the sums, using the alpha level of  $p < .01$ , there was a significant difference in the single mothers’ pretest ( $M=3.20$ ,  $SD=.72$ ) and posttest ( $M=3.67$ ,  $SD=.76$ ) scores. For the social isolation subscale  $t(26) = -4.26$ ,  $p = .000$ . The data show that mothers who were socially isolated in all likelihood would take part and benefit from participating in the SNS. It can help them cope better and feel less isolated as they make connections with others facing similar challenges. The results indicate that the participants perceived themselves as a member of a community. The means and standard deviations of the individual items and the total parenting domain subscale of isolation scores are presented in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8

Results of Paired t test of Pretest and Posttest Responses for Parenting Domain Subscale of Isolation

Pair	Items	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig (2-tailed)
1	I feel alone and without friends.	3.48 4.33	1.42 1.07	26	-4.16	.000**
2	I don't enjoy myself at parties.	3.67 4.15	1.11 .95	26	-2.47	.021*
3	I am not interested in people as I used to be.	2.52 3.67	1.22 1.44	26	-4.51	.000**
4	I believe people my own age don't like my company.	3.78 4.33	1.22 .96	26	-3.09	.005*
5	I have a lot of people to get advice.	2.63 1.89	1.28 .89	26	1.89	.002*
6	I have a lot fewer chances to see and make new friends.	3.11 3.67	1.22 1.27	26	-2.66	.013*
10	Sum of scale	3.20 3.67	.72 .73	26	-4.26	.000**

\*  $p < .05$  Level of significance. \*\*  $p < .01$  level of significance

#### Research Question 4 Results

Research question 4 asks, “What themes are reflected in the content analysis of the blog posts in the SNS?” The focus of this question was to determine if there were certain words, phrases, or themes within the participants’ postings that indicated the mothers’ attitudes and behaviors towards being single parents. This question helped provide insight how the mothers handled various challenges that impact raising their children alone. Again, the goal of the SNS was to provide the participants with a platform to give and receive social support to enhance the

quality of their parenting experience. The formal statement of this question is: “What communication themes of the group blog postings in the SNS designed to support them are derived from a content analysis?”

A content analysis was conducted on the participants’ blog postings in the SNS to identify patterns and themes (Berg, 2007). Participants were asked to introduce themselves and answer three weekly questions over a 21-day period. Results of analyses are given here as preliminary observations, the introductory comments, and comments in response to each of the three questions. Note that all spellings in comments are same in copy (sic).

**Preliminary observations about postings.** In the time the mothers participated in the SNS, their postings revealed that they used the SNS to share their concerns, frustrations, and encouragement. For example, one participant explained that she was a new mom and didn’t have any family support. She had been out on the streets until she became pregnant with her son. The mother posted, “ive done wrong but im done wit that life. man, this is hard.” The young mother explained that if it had not been for her child, she would probably be dead or in jail. She expressed that she was “glad to be here and try sumthin new.” Replies like “We are all here to share and learn from each other as well as offer support to each other” and “We are here for one another. Keep doing right and keep your head up” provided all new mothers with encouragement to continue to share their feelings and concerns with the group and receive the support they needed. Some of the specific topics of discussion disclosed were coping with no support from family and friends, finding a job with flexible hours and sufficient wages, finding inexpensive children’s activities, time constraints, relying on government assistance, bouncing back from divorce, strain of going back to school, dealing with relationship issues, balancing work and

home life, communicating with children, raising children without their father, emotional strain on the children due to the absent father, and keeping up with daily responsibilities.

Participants interacted both with the researcher, as well as other mothers, though one mother chose to observe and not respond. There were a total of 243 postings with one participant posting 52 times. The participants in the SNS tended to interact well with this mother. In one of her responses to another mother, the participant shared one of her grandmother's favorite quotes.

Yes, Nichole that is rare. I tip my hat to you for being an awesome example of role model material. You are what my great-grandmother calls a "have-to-do" mom...you do what you have to do for you and yours...that was her favorite thing to say to us growing up...real mothers make sacrifices but they don't sacrifice their children to make those sacrifices. God will continue to bless you for all that you do!! :)

Awesome strength comes from within and you have a lot of it...God is always with us and gives us just what we need to go that next step....hats off to you!! :)

**Findings on introductory comments.** An observation of the "Welcome Page" postings revealed five themes: gratitude for the SNS, anticipation for the new experience, excitement about meeting others, expressions of gratitude for not being alone, and anticipation for to receive resources. One mother posted, "I'm glad to have something like this because I don't have a lot of friends and family." A total of 10 participants shared that they were looking forward to meeting other single mothers and to know that they were not alone. One participant posted, "Yes, it is nice to have a place where we can talk with other single moms. People don't realize how hard it is for us." The women responded to her with supportive replies. The mother responded:

Hello and Welcome Shaquanna, you are never alone, sweetie, God is always with us. Guiding our paths to cross at the right time and the right place with the right people to walk with us thru what lies ahead of us that we are yet to experience and to overcome that which we have. Each one of us has something that can and will

help someone else who has walk in our shoes or are about to walk in our shoes and that includes those of us who are in the same shoes with underlying trials that only God knows that we need in our lives. This shows that there's a sisterhood that is stronger than just a friendship...but friendship is the foundation we build on and I hope we all can build a strong one and continue to be there for each other even after this study group is completed. I think this is an awesome idea and that we all would be better to help each other and others they we are now.

Six mothers posted they were looking forward to the new experience. A participant with an autistic son explained that she hardly got out of the house due to her responsibilities. She shared, "I look forward to meeting and sharing resources and experiences."

The participants were asked to introduce themselves and explain why they chose their username, tell about their family, and share an important life lesson. For example, one mother shared:

Well my name is Zena Warrior Princess. I selected that name, because that is what I feel like every day I am blessed to wake up. A woman-mother fighting everyday for what is right for me and my family. I have been blessed with two beautiful children a son, 16 and a daughter, 13. They are my reason for living and breathing. My life lesson I would like to share is that do unto others as you would like them to do unto you. I treat others as I would like to be treated and I love me some Zena lol. I have mad respect for myself so I always try to carry myself like a lady, being that positive role model for my daughter and son. I want him to know how to treat a real woman. So this is me ZENA the Warrior Princess!!

As part of participation in the SNS, the researcher provided the mothers with links to various resources. One mother posted, "Thank you for providing this outlet for us Single Mothers. Looking forward to all the positive resources." Information on how to apply for "Scholarship for Mom" on the Oprah.com website was shared with the participants. One mother responded, "Thank you. I am going to apply. I would like to go back to school so me and my son can have a better life." A library that was built into the SNS was filled with information on topics, such as budgeting, stress, building family relationships, disciplining, health and nutrition, parenting, and links to websites specifically for single mothers. The mothers also shared tips and

resources with one another, such as activities for small children, inexpensive educational books and cd's. One mother posted the following:

You are so welcome. IMVU is a 3D Virtual World Chat. I have been on there for quite some time now. It is my little piece of solitude away from the real world when i need a break. You can pretty much do just about anything in, and have whatever persona you chose. But you get to meet people from all over the world. Learn to create things with the help of those like myself who are creators. We create rooms, clothes, furniture and etc for everyone to use...these are purchased in the game using credits. I have friends that I have known for awhile and we have join together as a family and still growing. We look out for each other and are there for support as a real family.

**Analysis of Blog Question 1 postings.** Week-1 question asked, “With all the responsibilities you have as a single mother, what challenges have you had to face trying to work, attend school, or pursue a career? Please share how you overcame or handled it.” The top four themes in the analysis of responses were time, work, school, and childcare. The researcher noted that some mothers responded with more than one item as challenging. Table 4.9 lists the participants’ answers.

Table 4.9

Summary of Participants' Responses to Week-1 Blog Question

Challenge	Frequency
Time	12
Work	10
School	6
Childcare	2

The following is the posting of one mother shared about the challenges she faced with time and work:

I think my biggest challenge is time....and the right employer. I have a very very flexible job and have worked for the same company for 11 years of my 14 year old son's life. I am able to attend all sports practices, games, pick him up when he is sick, take trips with him etc. but I know that is rare. I have been able to move up in my company because at times, I have sacrificed time with my son....but not for games and practice. Only on regular weekdays. My son has had to be cared for by other people but I think it has benefited him and he understands that his mom will always be there when it counts but I still have the mom guilt of not giving him enough, even though logically, I know he has more than enough of me.

One mothers' response to the question revealed her frustrations about working, attending school, and how she handled it. Her posting states:

my main issue with being a single parent and trying to work and attend school is having a support system to back me up when i need it sometimes i dont have anyone to help with my kids especially on weekends when my older daughter doesnt have school. i recently had to choose between work and school so i left school in order to work and provide for them.

Another mother explained that without affordable childcare it is hard for single mothers to work or go to school. She shared how she had to reconsider how she approached unexpected situations.

Being a single parent is not easy. In pursuit of trying to better yourself, something always comes up. Going to school, going to work or pursuing a career cost money

and time. Time and money I dont have enough of. I use to try and plan everything. If something came up unexpectedly I would get so pissed off and my day was ruined. I soon realized this was not healthy for me or my kids. I realized things are going to happen if I like it or not. Being mad stops nothing. Now I just go with the flow. So what I didnt put dinner on ghe table until 9, we ate! It cost money to have a babysitter. Its not cheap.You cant work, go to school or pursue a career without someone watching your children. Affordable childcare is hard to find.

After observing several participants discuss how parental support has made a difference in their lives and now their children's lives, the researcher decided to add a "Detour" to get further insight on what the mothers' thoughts and attitudes were on the subject. The initial posting that sparked the discussion stated:

The most important life lesson I have learned is..#1 if you don't have amazing parents to back you as a young mom..life is so tough(I'm blessed to have. House and financial backing from them)

The researcher uploaded the music video, *How to Love* by Lil Wayne. It provides two different scenarios of a young girl being raised with and without parental love and guidance. Participants were asked to post their thoughts and comments on it if they liked. It was obvious that the video stuck home for those who chose to reply. One of the mothers posted:

I've seen this video before. It is something how the two women ended up in different places based on her mother's support, love, and protection. Our job, obligation, and responsibilities as single moms is sooooooo stressful, but regardless we have to do--what we have to do. Our children do need us...they depend on us. If we don't protect them, no one else will do it like we do.

**Analysis of Blog Question 2 postings.** Week-2 blog question was: "With all the money issues our country is going through, please share if a lack of money is or has been an issue for you. Please explain how you have handled any money problems and from who/where you may have received help (i.e., family, friends, agencies, etc.)." A total of 15 mothers responded that

money was a huge issue for them, 7 mothers used a budget to manage their money, while 4 received help from family and friends. Five mothers received some sort of government assistance, whether food stamps or a Family First check. The researcher noted that some mothers responded with more than one item. Table 4.10 lists the participants' answers.

Table 4.10  
Summary of Participants' Responses to Week-2 Blog Question

Resource	Frequency
Budget	7
Support from Family/Friends	4
Government Assistance	5
Huge Issue/no help	15

One mother shared the following response to the question revealing how stressful the lack of money to provide for her family is for her:

yes money has been a major issue for me it really stresses me out not being able to do the things i want to do for my kids alot of times i find myself crying and worrying about how i will make ends meet. i hate for my kids to see me cry just a few days ago i cried and didnt realize my 19 month old was watching until she hugged me and said mommy stop crying it made me cry even harder.

Another mother who receives financial support from her family posted that she doesn't know what she would do without their assistance.

Money seems to always be a concern. I have received food stamps to help my family. Food is so expensive, especially when your trying to eat healthy. My son is constantly growing and always seems to NEED something. I know how it feels to struggle. Fortunately, I have the help of my family and don't know what I would do

without them. Although his dad is a good dad, he lives in another state and is not always able to pick up the slack.

**Analysis of Blog Question 3 postings.** The question for Week-3 asked, “Everyone encounters stress in some form or another. Share here how you handle stress – either in a healthy or unhealthy way?” Participants reported they handle stress with isolation, music, helping others, food, friends/family, sleeping, or writing, with God/prayer being the most frequently cited coping mechanism. The following is a posting of how one mother shared how she handles stress:

STRESS!! I feel like I'm rushing and stressed all the time as a single mother. No rest or relaxation for the weary...lol. I handle this by prayer. God is my strength and my rock, for without Him I can't handle anything, but with Him I can handle anything....AND I SHALL!!

Table 4.11 lists a summary of the participants’ answers to this blog question. Some mothers responded that they used more than one coping mechanism.

Table 4.11

Summary of Participants’ Responses to Week-3 Blog Question

Coping Mechanism	Frequency
God	14
Isolation	5
Music	4
Helping others	2
Food	2
Friends/family	2
Sleeping	2
Writing	1

By the end of the intervention, participants were posting about the possibilities of starting an organization for single mothers and suggested to continue with the community forum after the study was completed. An example of participant responses was from Participant #1: “I've learned a lot, and would enjoy the many other ideas that would come out should we continue.”

### **Summary of Study Results**

In summary, results of the *t* test revealed there was a significant difference in the pretest to posttest gains across the depression, role restriction, and isolation domains. A bivariate correlation in the time the women spent in the SNS and their test scores showed that there was no significant correlation between the time spent in the SNS and difference in participants' scores across the three parenting domain subscales (depression, role restriction, and isolation). A content analysis of the three blog questions showed that the participants' biggest challenges were time, work, and attending school. Over half said money was a huge stressor for them. It was reported that the women handled or overcame stress through several kinds of mechanisms. The most frequently reported mechanism was prayer and their faith in God.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### Overview of Study Methods and Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of participation in a SNS on the parenting stress levels of single mothers. It was intended that this study would build and expand upon the initial work of Dunham et al. (1998) and contribute to the research literature on ways to address single mothers' parenting stress levels. Positive findings would help build a case that SNSs can provide an easy and convenient way to communicate and maintain relationships among single mothers without being face-to-face. A mixed-methods approach and a one-group pretest/posttest, pre-experimental design were used to examine the impact of participation in a social network on the parenting stress levels of single mothers. A total of 27 single mothers participated in this study through the use of snowball sampling. The quantitative data were obtained through the original measuring tool, the Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1995). The qualitative data were gathered through the participants' responses to three blog questions in the SNS. This study focused on addressing the research questions and testing the hypotheses below:

1. Does participation in an SNS decrease mothers' stress levels?

Hypothesis 1: Single mothers who participate in the SNS will experience a decrease in parental stress levels. Results of a paired-samples *t* test on the two parenting domain subscales (depression and role restriction) showed there were significant

differences from pretest to posttest. The null hypothesis was rejected for the overall subscale and a portion of the individual items.

2. Does the increasing time in an SNS have a positive impact on the mothers' stress levels?

Hypothesis 2: The more time single mothers participate in the SNS, the greater will be the decrease in the parenting stress levels. Results of Bivariate Correlations across the parenting domain subscale (depression, role restriction, and isolation) showed no significant correlation from pretest to posttest; therefore, the null hypothesis was retained.

3. Do participants report decreased levels of social isolation as a result of participation in a SNS?

Hypothesis 3: Single mothers will experience decreased levels of social isolation from participating in the SNS. Results of a paired-samples *t* test on the parenting domain subscale of isolation showed there were significant differences from pretest to posttest. The null hypothesis was rejected for the overall subscale and individual items.

4. What themes are reflected in the content analysis of the blog posts in the SNS?

No hypotheses were tested for this question. A content analysis of the three blog questions showed that the participants' biggest challenges were time, work, and attending school. Over half said money was a huge stressor for them. It was reported that the women handled or overcame stress through several kinds of coping mechanisms. The single most frequently cited strategy was prayer and faith in God.

Results of this study support the conclusion that other studies have found: Social connections and support from others are vital to our welfare as humans (Dunham et al., 1998; Durkheim, 1951; Murray, 1938). Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Motivation Theory posited that social needs are the first level of higher needs. It appears the SNS offered the participants an opportunity to establish human connections through the use of the community forum contributing to a reduction in the mother's stress levels. Online communication may render the same effects as face-to-face communication and, thus, can enhance or substitute the support that many single mothers' need.

### **Interpretation of Survey Study Results**

Social support is a resource that has been found to have positive outcomes for stress reduction (Hobfoll, 1986; Morse & Furst, 1982) and decrease social isolation (Prins et al., 2009). The data in this study support Dunham et al.'s (1998) work, which concluded that computer-based social networking can serve to alleviate some of the feelings of isolation common to the group. Although the researcher's position was to monitor and guide postings through the use of weekly discussion questions, it was noted that one participant dominated group discussions. The mother posted a total of 52 times and seemed to help make other participants feel welcomed and comfortable sharing with others, in addition to pulling the group together to become more cohesive. The women quickly forged relationships in the SNS to help get one another through the highs and lows of life at that time.

### **Research Question 1 Interpretations**

The results demonstrated that the women felt less stressed after participating in the SNS, perhaps because they used this virtual social community to discuss various worries, concerns, and experiences that were troubling them at the time. A report from the Pew Internet American Life Project (2011) stated that the Internet is increasingly being used for social interactions and that this use promotes deeper social connections. The results of this study demonstrated that the use of an SNS could help to reduce parenting stress. The SNS provides the mothers with an outlet that allows them the opportunity to form bonds, to provide and receive support from others with similar experiences, and develop a sense of community. This is consistent with the finding of Dunham et al. (1998). This study also agreed with findings by Webber and Boromeo (2005) that receiving support can be crucial for single mothers to cope effectively with daily stressors.

The participants' appeared excited to have access to the SNS. Their initial comments were of gratitude and an eagerness to get started. Many stated they were looking forward to getting to know others who shared the same situation. Postings were positive and seemed to show the emotions the women were feeling at that moment. The participants' responses to one another appeared to confirm the cohesiveness of the group and a sense of community among the participants. Mothers who contributed the most received the most support and encouragement.

### **Research Question 2 Interpretations**

Unlike the original study, the time the participants spent in the SNS were not tracked; however, the total number of postings per participant was available. Findings from this study were different from the original study where Dunham et al. (1998) reported that the more the participants accessed the virtual social support community, the stronger their sense of belonging

and the more likely they were to report reduced levels of parenting stress following the intervention. This may have been caused due to a lack of time and environmental factors, such as a sick child, relationship issues, or an unpaid bill that may have prevented the mothers logging on as often as they may have liked. Participants may have been forced to live with feelings of hopelessness that their circumstances could not or would not change. Another factor to consider is the length of time of this study. The data presented in Table 4.7 may indicate it may have been too short to see a significant difference in the mothers' stress levels. Similar to the original study, participants could assess the SNS 24 hours per day; however the difference is in the length of the two. The original study conducted a 6-month intervention, whereas this study was for only 21 days. One might expect that the constant stress associated with this population may have also been a contributor to no relationship between the time the mothers devoted to the SNS and their change in parental stress levels. A problem that may have been addressed on one day may not necessarily resolve new problems that may come up the next day.

### **Research Question 3 Interpretations**

The data show that mothers who were socially isolated would probably take part and benefit from participating in the SNS. The community forum seemed to give the women a greater overall satisfaction of themselves and their parenting skills. Many were able to make connections with others, which is believed to have helped them to identify themselves as a member of the group. Many may speculate that online communication cannot replace face-to-face communication, but it is evident based on the data in this study that the single mothers can benefit from participating in the SNS. This is consistent with past findings (Hampton et al., 2011; Smith, 2011; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001).

These women are looking for a safe and positive outlet that they can access at any time to share struggles, give and receive encouragement, and socialize. One site that offers an abundance of information and resources for single mothers is The Single Parents Network developed in 1997. This site offers a Social Parent Forum, articles on single parent issues, a live chat option, a newsletter, and links to find employment and a dating site. Websites such as this is greatly needed for single mothers who experience a high level of stress due to feelings of isolation and alienation from their friends and family, as well as the pressure to provide for their children with very little assistance. There are government agencies that provide assistance for single mothers in the areas of food and nutrition, rent, housing programs, and childcare assistance, but many do not specifically support and connect single mothers together to reduce feelings of isolation and to help build positive relationships.

## **Interpretation of Content Analysis Results**

### **Research Question 4 Interpretations**

Based on an examination of the postings, there was a significant amount of giving and receiving of encouragement and support among the women. Although, there was no relationship between the time the mothers devoted to the SNS and their change in parental stress levels, there was a significant pre-post difference of all items on the social isolation subscale. The participants welcomed each other to the site and seemed excited about sharing with one another about some of the things they were dealing with in their personal lives.

There were many postings about stressful relationships with others, such as a partner, parent, or friend and about financial problems associated with their low levels of income. The participants seemed excited about the SNS and looked forward to meeting and connecting with

other single mothers. Based on their postings, it appeared that they felt comfortable in sharing personal information about themselves. It seemed as if it served as a self-help support group for the participants. The mothers seemed to get relief in knowing they were not alone, they supported each other, and suggested new ways of dealing with certain issues. The participants' willingness to freely share with one another may have been partly due to feeling that they were a part of a safe environment full of peers. The participants seemed to be fully engaged in the SNS based on their responses to the weekly blog questions. This is an indication that they were committed to being an active member of the SNS. Their postings provided insight to their thoughts and attitudes on the weekly topics.

Participants were very receptive to one of the mother's postings and comments. They responded positively to her works of inspiration, open to her suggestions, and responsive to her postings. There was one mother that entered the site but did not take part in responding to the weekly blog questions. This may have been due in part to the stress and feelings of embarrassment and shame of a situation that she was dealing with, trust issues, inadequacy of sharing a problem that had not already been brought up in the SNS, or may have been due to difficulty in communicating with others. Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969, 1988) suggested that the bonding a child experiences determines how one relates to people throughout their lives, because it determines the foundation for all forms of communication in future relationships. This may have been another reason the mother decided not to post in the SNS. She may have been dealing with communication issues such as this her entire life.

By the end of the intervention, participants were making suggestions to collaborate on starting an organization specifically for single mothers. This indicates that the mothers perceived that the SNS was helpful in providing a platform for them to bond with others who shared the

same stressful experiences, in addition to helping them realize the need for more programs that support them. Participants made the suggestion to continue with the community forum after the 3-week study was scheduled to end.

### **Limitations**

Some characteristics of the study limit the conclusions that may be drawn from the findings. The first is the sampling of “hard to reach” population. Although this population is not hidden and is on the rise according to the Census Bureau (2009), it was challenging to make contact with the population. Attempts made to contact them through various agencies were unsuccessful due to the agency representatives’ concerns of risking confidentiality. The single mothers who agreed to participate helped to share information about the study through word of mouth to friends, families, and co-workers. Out of the entire single-mother population in Chattanooga, only 27 volunteered to take part in the study. This may have been due to lack of interest or because some mothers suffered from mental illness, depression, or addiction without access to adequate medical assistance.

For this study, this single geographic may limit generalizability to other locations. Second, the sample size ( $n=27$ ) for this study was small, so findings cannot be generalized to the larger population of single mothers. Study generalizability to others in the general population was limited by several factors in addition to small sample size. All mothers voluntarily participated in the study. Berg (2007) states that there should be some ethical concern about voluntary participation in behavioral research, especially:

“if all social research included only those persons who eagerly volunteered to participate, little meaningful understanding would result. There would be no way

of determining if these types of persons were similar to others who lacked this eagerness to volunteer...data would become questionable” (p. 71).

Voluntary participation also carries the risk of subjects being manipulated into taking part in the research and not being informed of all potential risks. For this study, individuals who expressed interest were emailed a consent form (see Appendix B). Since the consent form was the only identifiable information about the participants, an informed consent was used when the women logged into the password-protected site and completed the PSI pretest. The participants were informed that participation was voluntary and there were minimal risks since they would create and utilize usernames in the SNS.

There is also the concern about the honesty of responses in an open forum. The participants may not have answered truthfully to some of the weekly blog questions, particularly those dealing with a personal crisis, relationship problems, or self-esteem issues. This may have been due to feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed about sharing their current circumstances or about receiving government assistance.

For this study, the one-group pretest/posttest, pre-experimental design was employed. The validity of the pre-experimental design is often questioned (Babbie, 2013). This may be due in part to there not being any way of judging whether the intervention had an influence on the outcomes. Without having a control group or comparison group, it is difficult to filter out whether something else in the participants' lives, other than the SNS, might have caused a change between the pretest and posttest results. This study could have benefited from having both a test group that participated in the SNS and a control group that did not. This would have strengthened this study by providing a better idea of the impact the SNS had on the mothers' stress levels.

Another limitation is the duration of the study. The original length of this study was planned to be 45 days. During the pilot study, many of the participants either slowed down or stopped participating at all near the third week of the study, thus reducing this study time to 21 days. Many of the reasons the mothers provided for dropping out of the pilot study were due to overwhelming responsibilities, other things going on in their life, and time constraints. The space of a week between blog questions may also have had an impact on the reduction in the mothers' participation. Two discussion questions a week or one weekly discussion question with an activity to reinforce the topic may have helped to keep the mothers engaged in the SNS activities and to obtain additional research data.

### **Implications for Practice**

Organizations that offer support and resources specifically for single mothers could benefit from utilizing an SNS. Two organizations that are currently serving this population are Hope Unlimited and The Oak Project. Although the services they provide may be helpful in increasing the number of connections and interpersonal relationships, if the findings of this study hold true, organizations could perhaps benefit from incorporating an SNS, such as the one created for this study, into their repertoire of services to expand their outreach. It would afford them the opportunity to reach the portion of this population that is isolated while still offering the support and resources they may need to cope. The possibilities of incorporating an SNS could result in an abundance of love and community that can often help these women get through difficult times. While more organizations and programs such as these are needed to provide a holistic approach in providing single mothers the assistance and resources they need, it is still quite evident, based on the participants' responses that they have only begun to scratch the

surface in reaching this population. In cases where organizations are unable to develop and offer access to a SNS, the organization could suggest various sites that the single mothers could join to connect with other single mothers.

Start-up funding could be sought to start and maintain an SNS that provides secure 24-hour accessibility with online support should participants experience any issues within the site. In order to achieve the best results for these women, much thought should go into how the SNS is designed. It should be easy to navigate through, be interactive, and organized to keep the mothers engaged. Some of the options that could be included on this site are a variety of resources on topics of interest to the participants, a discussion board, photos, video-sharing, links to other sites, and e-mail. An added benefit would be if the members could email or chat with a licensed social worker or counselor individually or as a group (this is sometimes called e-therapy). Although it may be limited, it allows for some interaction with a licensed professional who is able to offer positive tips and reinforcement to help the mothers feel like they have control of their lives.

Though online social networking offers many benefits, including ease of access, there are other interventions organizations could offer in an effort to reduce isolation among single mothers, such as a mentoring/befriending program, group services, or home-based visits. A one-on-one mentoring/befriending program could be implemented over the telephone, online, or in person to provide the mothers with emotional support. The range of group services an organization could offer is very broad. It could consist of a self-help or self-support group with discussions and social activities with transportation. A home-based visit program can offer participants emotional, practical, and social support.

## **Implications for Future Research**

Future studies concerning single mothers should continue the focus on parental stress associated with this population. In this study, findings concluded that stress and social isolation are excessive due to the mothers' handling all the responsibilities of running a household alone. This would help leaders and policymakers better understand programming needs for this population. For example, programs that will aid single mothers in achieving self-sufficiency and eliminating stressors that result in elevated strain and pressure that have been proven to lead to mental health issues. This could also lend knowledge to the development of incentives for employers to offer flexible work hours for single mothers to take a more active role in their children's education and extracurricular activities. If these findings hold true, it seems organizations can do the following in future studies.

## **Replication Studies**

Future replication studies should be done to utilize the same methods and instruments, but with a larger population. The timeframe of the study should be longer than three weeks in order to find whether the time spent in the SNS has a positive impact on the mothers' stress levels. The duration of the study could be lengthened for researchers to take care to produce more valid and reliable results. Other future studies could compare single mothers with single fathers or married women with severe economic issues to see if they share the same stressors, attitudes, behaviors, and coping mechanisms.

### **Studies with Different Methods**

Future studies could employ better research designs than the one used in the study reported here. For example, conducting participant interviews would allow the researcher to get a vivid picture of the mothers' attitudes towards parenting and multiple roles with little or no help. Interviews could help to gain insight into how the mothers are affected emotionally. An online focus group interview could connect mothers from multiple geographic locations either synchronously (live chat) or asynchronously (SNS) ((Berg, 2007). This would strengthen the ability to generalize data to the entire population. The focus group could be unguided allotting a specific amount of time to discuss various topics or use a moderator to guide the group.

Other future studies could be expanded to a quasi-experimental design (Babbie, 2013) which compares one group that receives the treatment with a group or groups that do not receive a treatment. There is also the experimental design that incorporates some of the features from both the pre-experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and includes random assigning participants into the groups. The strength in both the quasi-experimental and experimental designs exist in being able to say with some degree of confidence that the outcomes were achieved as a result of the intervention provided.

### **Studies within an Organization**

Future studies could be administered within an organization that already serves this “hard to reach” population. This would provide a convenience sampling reducing the challenges in establishing contact with this population and concerns of risking confidentiality. For example, the aforementioned organizations, The Oak Project or Hope Unlimited, could conduct a study with their current single mother clientele. Great consideration would have to go into sample

selection and the development of the site to ensure that participants are comfortable working with technology. In order to establish the tone of the SNS, it would have to be welcoming and professional looking. This will help participants to understand that they need to be respectful of one another and the organization hosting the SNS. The SNS would have to be designed to keep the participants engaged by presenting information and resources timely and efficiently to avoid participants dropping out due to lack of interest. Future studies could also include case studies of these types of organizations that have used SNSs for the purpose of connecting their single mother clientele to reduce social isolation. Face-to-face interviews or videoconferencing with organization representatives' could reveal any specific issues, challenges, or achievements the organization would have had to deal with and the impact the SNS had on the participants.

### **Studies with Other Social Media**

Future studies may also seek to explore the impact of other social media platforms on decreasing social isolation. For example, Twitter might achieve better results because it is more accessible and could expand the populations by using hashtags. This will allow participants to search for tweets about a certain topic. For example, a mother could search a tweet for #parenting stress. A search can be conducted on Twitter for a certain term or a search from certain people. Another social media platform that could be used is Facebook. This platform may be successful in reaching this population. A group can be created and require administrator approval to control who is able to join. This offers community members the opportunity to connect and have a more personal relationship. The group can be open for everyone to see content or closed to the public not showing it. Future studies could also be conducted comparing the use of different social media platforms, such as Facebook, Tumblr, Snapchat, or Google+.

For example, participants could be randomly placed in two comparison groups receiving different treatments to see if there is a change in their pretest/posttest results. One group would utilize Facebook as the platform, while the other would utilize Snapchat, a mobile-based SNS based on instant messaging, as the platform. After the intervention the results would be compared to see which platform achieved better results through the use of customized blog themes and postings of various kinds of content formats.

### **Conclusions**

It is important to increase society's knowledge on the stress single mothers experience, brought on by the pressures of their multiple roles and various responsibilities. For women who are the head of their household, support and resources can be imperative to their family's success. This study helped to shed light on the attitudes of women handling various challenges raising their children alone. For future single mothers, an SNS such as the one created for this study could be their link to the outside world. The findings from this study showed that at least some single mothers are willing to find the time to participate in a SNS to be able to connect and share with other mothers with similar experiences. This study revealed that these women can benefit from participating in an SNS designed specifically for them because it not only allows them to offer and receive emotional comfort and support, but if carefully developed can provide access to resources they may not have had otherwise. An SNS can provide single mothers the opportunity to increase human connections with others and reduce social isolation which can often lead to depression or other mental health issues.

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APPENDIX A  
PARENTING STRESS INDEX

## Parenting Stress Index

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### 30. I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

### 31. I often feel that my child's needs control my life.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

### 32. Since having my child(ren), I have been unable to do new and different things.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

### 33. Since having my child(ren), I feel that I am almost never able to do things that I like to do.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

## Parenting Stress Index (cont'd)

**41. I felt sadder and more depressed than I expected after leaving the hospital with my baby.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

**42. I wind up feeling guilty when I get angry at my child(ren) and this bothers me.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

**43. After my child(ren) had been home from the hospital for about a month, I noticed that I was feeling more sad and depressed than I had expected.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

**44. Since having my child(ren), my male friend has not given me as much help and support as I expected.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Potential Participant:

Thank you for your interest in this dissertation study to explore the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) with single mothers. A minimum of 30 participants are expected to take part in this 3-week study. Single mothers with at least one school-age child living in the household have been asked to participate.

As a participant, you will work at your own pace and can expect to work in the SNS for at least one (1) hour per week. Before you begin and after you completed the 3-week of activities in the SNS, you will complete an online survey. No one outside the study will have access to your comments in the SNS. A password is needed to access both the survey and SNS. All surveys will be kept confidential.

Your participation is voluntary. You may chose not to take part in certain discussions on the blog. You may also withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty to you. Before accessing the password-protected site, you will create and employ a user name. No personal identifiers will be used. However, if you do take part in the full 3-week study, your user name will be entered into a drawing to win a \$100 gift card from Wal-Mart. The gift card will be mailed to the mailing address you provide.

There is minimal risk to you if you choose to participate in this study. The only risk is that someone might see your study materials, but this is unlikely since every effort will be made to keep them confidential. This SNS allows you the opportunity to connect and receive support from other single mothers who share the same issues as you do, and you may see a reduction in parental stress, but this cannot be guaranteed.

If you have any questions about this dissertation study, feel free to contact me or my Faculty Advisor at the email addresses provided below. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant contact Dr. Bart Weathington, Chair of the UTC Institutional Review Board at (423) 425-4289.

By logging into the SNS, you are giving your consent to participate in this dissertation study.

Thank you!!

Djuana Tomlin, Principal Investigator  
UTC School of Education  
mvr145@mocs.utc.edu

Dr. Hinsdale Bernard, Faculty Advisor  
UTC School of Education  
Hinsdale-bernard@utc.edu

APPENDIX C  
IRB APPROVAL PAGE

## MEMORANDUM

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TO: Djuana Tomlin **IRB # 12- 185**  
Dr. Hinsdale Bernard

FROM: Lindsay Pardue, Director of Research Integrity  
Dr. Bart Weathington, IRB Committee Chair

DATE: November 28, 2012

SUBJECT: IRB # 12-185: The Impact of Participation in Online Social Networking on Parenting Stress Levels of Single Mothers

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved your application and assigned you the IRB number listed above. You must include the following approval statement on research materials seen by participants and used in research reports:

***The Institutional Review Board of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (FWA00004149) has approved this research project #12-185.***

Please remember that you must complete a Certification for Changes, Annual Review, or Project Termination/Completion Form when the project is completed or provide an annual report if the project takes over one year to complete. The IRB Committee will make every effort to remind you prior to your anniversary date; however, it is your responsibility to ensure that this additional step is satisfied.

Please remember to contact the IRB Committee immediately and submit a new project proposal for review if significant changes occur in your research design or in any instruments used in conducting the study. You should also contact the IRB Committee immediately if you encounter any adverse effects during your project that pose a risk to your subjects.

For any additional information, please consult our web page <http://www.utc.edu/irb> or email [instrb@utc.edu](mailto:instrb@utc.edu)

Best wishes for a successful research project.

**MEMORANDUM**

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TO: Djuana Tomlin **IRB # 12-185**  
Dr. Hinsdale Bernard

FROM: Lindsay Pardue, Director of Research Integrity  
Dr. Bart Weathington, IRB Committee Chair

DATE: August 8, 2013

SUBJECT: **IRB #:12-185:** The Impact of Participation in Online Social Networking on Parenting Stress Levels of Single Mothers

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved the following changes for the IRB project listed below:

- Reduce the time participants spend in the Social Network Site (SNS), from 45 days to 21 days
- Remove the interview research tool, only using the Parenting Stress Index and Content Analysis of blog posts
- Eliminate the use of the Application Exercises and Resource; the SNS will provide only one form of social communication through the use of a blog
- Research question #4 will be changed to: "What themes are reflected in the content analysis of the blog posts in the SNS?"

You must include the following approval statement on research materials seen by participants and used in research reports:

***The Institutional Review Board of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (FWA00004149) has approved this research project # 12-185.***

Please remember that you must complete a Certification for Changes, Annual Review, or Project Termination/Completion Form when the project is completed or provide an annual report if the project takes over one year to complete. The IRB Committee will make every effort to remind you prior to your anniversary date; however, it is your responsibility to ensure that this additional step is satisfied.

Please remember to contact the IRB Committee immediately and submit a new project proposal for review if significant changes occur in your research design or in any instruments used in conducting the study. You should also contact the IRB Committee immediately if you encounter any adverse effects during your project that pose a risk to your subjects.

For any additional information, please consult our web page <http://www.utc.edu/irb> or email [instrb@utc.edu](mailto:instrb@utc.edu)

Best wishes for a successful research project.

## VITA

Djuana Ann Tomlin was born in Rockford, Illinois, to Eva Lee Jackson. She is a proud single mother of three sons: Ricky, 24 years old; DeKarlos, 21 years old, and JeDon, 14 years old.

After graduating with a B.S. Degree from Lambuth University in Jackson, Tennessee, she moved her family to Chattanooga, Tennessee to begin her professional career with U.S. Xpress Enterprises. She was promoted to an Account Manager and was relocated to Champaign-Urbana, Illinois where she completed her M.S. Degree at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston. After receiving another promotion, she relocated her family back to Chattanooga and decided to pursue her doctorate through the Learning and Leadership Doctorate of Education program at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga in 2006. Her passion for learning and working with single mothers made it easy for her to decide to step out on faith and make a career change. She worked as a Program Assistant for a year with the TNCEP (Tennessee Nutrition & Consumer Education Program) at the University of Tennessee Extension Services and then worked one year as an Extension Agent with the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) at Tennessee State University in Nashville. In 2009, she traveled to South Africa on a month long study abroad program before working the start-up of Chattanooga Girls Leadership Academy, the first all-girls charter school, as the Family and Community Engagement Specialist.

Djuana is a proud grandmother of two grandsons, DeShun Harlem, 4 years old and Chase Evan Lee, 1 year old. She lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee with her youngest son, JeDon where

she works as the Region East Trainer for Check Into Cash in Cleveland, Tennessee. In this capacity, she is blessed to be able to travel and use her education to deliver classroom training to field/operation employees, as well as design, develop, implement, and evaluate training modules for employees company-wide. She hopes to one day start a non-profit where she is able to connect single mothers with one another from all over the world and help them to improve their life-skills.