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Doing Gender Online: New Mothers' Psychological Characteristics, Facebook Use, and Depressive Symptoms

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Abstract

Online social networking sites, such as Facebook, have provided a new platform for individuals to produce and reproduce gender through social interactions. New mothers, in particular, may use Facebook to practice behaviors that align with their mothering identity and meet broader societal expectations, or in other words, to “do motherhood.” Given that Facebook use may undermine well-being, it is important to understand the individual differences underlying new mothers' experiences with Facebook during the stressful first months of parenthood. Using survey data from a sample of 127 new mothers with Facebook accounts residing in the U.S. Midwest, we addressed two key questions: (a) Are individual differences in new mothers' psychological characteristics associated with their use and experiences of Facebook? and (b) Are new mothers' psychological characteristics associated with greater risk for depressive symptoms via their use and experiences of Facebook? Regression analyses revealed that mothers who were more concerned with external validation of their identities as mothers and those who believed that society holds them to excessively high standards for parenting engaged in more frequent Facebook activity and also reported stronger emotional reactions to Facebook commentary. Moreover, mothers who were more concerned with external validation were more likely to have featured their child in their Facebook profile picture. Mediation analyses indicated that mothers who were more prone to seeking external validation for their mothering identity and perfectionistic about parenting experienced increases in depressive symptoms indirectly via greater Facebook activity.

Keywords

doing gender; transition to parenthood; Facebook; perfectionism; maternal identity

The *doing gender* perspective (West & Zimmerman, 1987) revolutionized thinking about gender-typed behavior by viewing gender as less of an individual characteristic and more of an emergent property of social interaction. Doing gender has been theorized as a series of accomplishments or practices that are expected based on one's birth-assigned sex category and are considered separate from any one body or category of bodies. Women generally do femininities and men do masculinities to varying degrees (Connell, 2000; Schippers, 2007). The repeated displays of masculinity and femininity and the supporting gender structure give rise to the appearance that these behaviors are innate, rather than socially-constructed, performances (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). People are held accountable to others for their gender performances and risk sanctions for deviating from normative practices. At the same time, individuals receive praise and affirmations when they do gender normatively (Hollander, 2013; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The present study explores which women, more specifically which new mothers in the United States, are particularly susceptible to doing gender online and the potential consequences of these practices for maternal well-being. Results of all empirical studies reviewed in our article are based on U.S. samples unless otherwise noted.

In the past decade, the advent of online social networking has provided a new platform for individuals to produce and reproduce gender through social interactions (Artwick, 2014). Facebook, the most popular social networking website in the world, with 1.59 billion monthly active users as of 2015 (Facebook Newsroom, 2016), provides a way in which family, friends, and acquaintances may communicate or share information, and it provides users an opportunity to obtain social support as well as to portray a particular identity (Bartholomew, Schoppe-Sullivan, Glassman, Kamp Dush, & Sullivan, 2012). For a number of reasons, Facebook is especially popular among new parents who face many challenges across the transition to parenthood, including the formation of new family relationships and the adoption of new roles and identities (Belsky & Pensky, 1988). To meet these challenges, first-time parents often increase efforts to connect with others to receive social support and to experience affirmation (Belsky, 1984). In today's world, new parents' efforts at social connection and validation play out in cyberspace as well as on the playground.

For new mothers in particular, the opportunities for connection and affirmation that Facebook promises may be especially attractive. Even in dual-earner families, mothers of infants still do the majority of childcare (Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Moreover, U.S. mothers' roles are highly idealized (Hays, 1996) and as such hold more restrictive expectations regarding how new mothers should think, feel, and act. Norms for intensive mothering (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996), which are especially salient for middle-to-upper class, highly educated mothers, dictate that mothers should invest significant amounts of time interacting with their children and supporting their children's educational and social development. New mothers may feel that they must adhere to impossibly high standards for parenting. Accordingly, new mothers may use Facebook to seek support for their mothering activities and as a platform to show the world that they are fulfilling their maternal roles. Bartholomew et al. (2012) found that despite increases in tasks and responsibilities associated with parenthood, new mothers reported an increase in their Facebook use across the transition to parenthood.

However, among employed new mothers with Facebook accounts, significant variability exists in the extent to which they use Facebook as they navigate the transition to parenthood (Bartholomew et al., 2012). Moreover, mothers may or may not receive the affirmation they seek via Facebook. Using data on a sample of 127 new mothers with Facebook accounts residing in the Midwestern region of the United States, we examined two key research questions: (a) Are individual differences in new mothers' psychological characteristics associated with their use and experiences of Facebook and with the extent to which they do gender? and (b) Are new mothers' psychological characteristics associated with greater risk for depressive symptoms via their use and experiences of Facebook? The two characteristics we focused on were maternal identity confirmation (Allen & Hawkins, 1999), which reflects concern with external validation of one's identity as a mother, and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism (Snell, Overbey, & Brewer, 2005), which reflects the extent to which an individual believes that society holds them to excessively high standards for parenting.

Our study makes important contributions to our understanding of socially constructing both gender (doing gender) and motherhood (doing motherhood) (MacDonald, 1998; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Our investigation identifies intersecting mechanisms between individual characteristics and broader gender expectations at a particularly stressful time period during mothers' lives. Given that this transition is a vulnerable time for new mothers, with increased rates of mental health challenges (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003), and given that Facebook use may undermine well-being (Kross et al., 2013) and is associated with greater parenting stress for new mothers (Bartholomew et al., 2012), it is important to understand the individual differences underlying new mothers' experiences with this social phenomenon. Our study identifies mothers who are most at risk for striving to meet nearly impossible domestic and parenting ideals, and therefore, also those mothers most at risk of experiencing adverse effects from social media usage.

Doing Gender

West and Zimmerman's (1987) conceptualization of gender stresses the importance of social interactions in doing gender. They highlight that gender is a relational construct that organizes people's behaviors, body comportment and adornment, and interactions with other social actors (Nentwich & Kelan, 2014; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Under this framework, gender does not exist prior to social interactions, but rather interactional work is done in each situation that enables others to recognize or determine someone as either a man or woman. Butler (1990) extended this work by focusing on the performativity and repetitiousness of gender. Gendered subjects, thus, are created through repetitious acts, and gender is fluid and an ongoing process that occurs during daily life. People do gender because of the risk of evaluation and potential sanctions that may result from not complying with culturally normative gender expectations (Hollander, 2013; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Accountability then derives from knowledge that their behavior may be assessed and may result in either positive or negative consequences depending on how their behaviors follow normative gender scripts. In this way, anticipatory assessments influence behaviors before any consequences have even been assigned, thereby altering the interactional outcome (Ridgeway, 2011).

Contemporary gender beliefs in the United States shape the way new mothers do gender. Ridgeway and Correll (2004, p. 511) define gender beliefs as the “core, defining cultural beliefs about gender.” Although beliefs about men and women have liberalized since the 1970s (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004), gender beliefs still depict women as more harmonious and communal and men as more active and autonomous (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). Traits associated with women are considered to be natural proclivities that stem from their expected domestic and maternal roles. Although individual and regional variations exist, most people in the United States, to some extent, hold these gender beliefs to be true—or at least are aware of these hegemonic beliefs (Lueptow, Garovich-Szabo, & Lueptow, 2001; Spence & Buckner, 2000). In fact, a few studies indicate that despite initial progress since the second-wave feminist movement, advancement of egalitarian beliefs has stalled since the 1990s (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011). Thus, if beliefs about women are largely consensual, new mothers, particularly those who feel especially constrained or aware of these norms, may feel a heightened expectation that they exhibit these traits and thus use social media as a way to receive confirmation for their conformity.

Research indicates that higher education and labor force participation are positively associated with more egalitarian views (Cotter et al., 2011). Women with more liberal attitudes typically believe that women can enjoy successful careers without compromising the well-being of children and believe that fathers should share the care of children (Hoffman & Moon, 1999). Yet, the emergence of intensive mothering, a parenting approach common among middle-class, highly educated women may actually counteract these egalitarian views in that women may still feel ultimately responsible for the cultivation and health of their child (Lareau, 2003). Consequently, our sample, which comprises employed and relatively highly educated women, may hold conflicting beliefs, as well as experience conflicting pressures, about parenting.

Doing Motherhood Online

A change in life situation (such as becoming a new mother) could heighten women’s sensitivities to pressures to do gender appropriately, especially considering that doing motherhood is a significant part of women doing gender (see McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Tichenor, 2008; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Over the past several decades, motherhood has been conceived through an intensive mothering framework: good mothering is “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays, 1996, p. 8). Although narratives of good mothering exist across racial groups, socioeconomic classes, and sexual orientations, intensive mothering is particularly prominent in middle- and upper-class White women. These narratives help shape women’s identities and how women interpret the meaning of their lives (Chase & Rogers, 2001). Social media websites offer a new platform in which women can practice gender and strengthen their feminine identity by publically showing their care, pride, and nurturance for their children. In other words, part of doing motherhood may now also include cultivating an online presence consistent with cultural gender norms.

Gender accountability reflects the notion that individuals’ practices, behaviors, and bodily comportment are at constant risk of being evaluated by others as consistent or inconsistent

with cultural norms and beliefs about gender, as well as the consequences that may result (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender accountability has expanded beyond face-to-face interactions to also include the interactions that occur on social media websites, such as Facebook (Green & Singleton, 2013). Women may feel real (e.g., people requesting baby pictures) or imagined pressures to cultivate an image of good mothering through updates (i.e., notes or comments about the child and/or pictures). Doing motherhood in this way may allow women to receive affirmations that they are doing gender correctly depending on the type of feedback their mothering pictures or updates elicit from their social circles (e.g., friends, co-workers, family). Some mothers, however, may be more sensitive to the gender accountability structure than are others or perceive stronger incentives to do motherhood normatively online. Yet, we could find no studies that systematically examine how new mothers do motherhood on social networking sites and the variation that exists between them. Considering the pervasiveness of Facebook in young people's lives and the potential for high Facebook usage to decrease well-being (Kross et al., 2013)—particularly during the early postpartum period when researchers, using diverse U.S. samples of women, find that women already have heightened stress levels (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003), this gap requires serious attention.

Mothers and Facebook: Individual Differences

We anticipated that individual differences in maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism would affect the extent to which mothers were sensitive to the gender accountability structure. If gender beliefs are perceived as consensual, then we expect that individuals who hold or believe that others hold high motherhood standards will be most likely to use social media as a platform to affirm that they meet these images of idealized mothering. We further anticipated that mothers who are more sensitive to the gender accountability structure and therefore more active on, and reactive to, Facebook would also be at greater risk for depressive symptoms. We will discuss these expectations in greater detail.

Identity theory suggests that individuals comprise multiple selves or identities and that there is a hierarchical ordering of these identities (Stryker, 1980). The expression of these identities may be done through self-presentation in which individuals choose to convey a desired image through information that is either (a) *given* (i.e., directly stated) or (b) *given off* (i.e., indirectly communicated through cues and other information; Stryker, 1959). One medium in which selective self-presentation and identity manipulation may occur is through online social networking sites such as Facebook, which allow users to manipulate and craft a particular image to other users. Specifically, in studies of racially diverse college students, researchers have found that individuals are able to present their ideal selves either directly or indirectly through status updates or posted photos (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Not only are users able to convey their chosen identity to society, but Facebook may also serve as a way for others to affirm that chosen identity through feedback.

Maternal identity confirmation is conceptualized as the extent to which a mother seeks external validation of her domestic role (Allen & Hawkins, 1999), which is characterized by

a focus on home, family, and domestic work. Mothers who seek greater external validation of these roles are believed to have more strongly internalized cultural expectations for motherhood, and their mothering identity may be more prominent in the identity hierarchy and more central to their notion of an ideal self (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014). Thus, mothers who are more concerned with receiving external validation of their mothering identity may more actively seek affirmation via Facebook.

Whereas the desire to confirm one's mothering identity may partially originate from within, countless external forces impose pressure on women to be the best parents possible for their children. In 1991, Hewitt and Flett introduced the construct of *societal prescribed perfectionism*, a variation of perfectionism that "entails people's belief or perception that significant others have unrealistic standards for them, evaluate them stringently, and exert pressure on them to be perfect" (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, p. 457). In 2005, Snell et al. extended this concept to the parenting domain by launching the construct of *societal-oriented parenting perfectionism*, which reflects the degree to which an individual believes that society holds them to excessively high standards for parenting, and they developed items to measure it.

As intensive mothering norms have taken hold among U.S. mothers with middle and high socioeconomic status (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996), many mothers may have high levels of societal-oriented parenting perfectionism and may strive to reach these impossibly high standards. Societal prescribed perfectionism may motivate problematic internet use (e.g., preference for online social interaction, compulsive internet use)—according to both U.S. (Lehmann & Konstam, 2011) and non-U.S. studies (Casale, Fioravanti, Flett, & Hewitt, 2014)—in part because the online environment appears to provide a context in which individuals feel that they have more control over the impressions they make on others and therefore the social judgments they receive. As such, new mothers higher in societal-oriented parenting perfectionism may be likely to use Facebook more and experience Facebook more intensely.

Another set of characteristics that has been associated with Facebook use and experiences are the Big 5 personality dimensions (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1993) that have been consistently linked to a number of important life outcomes, including physical and psychological health and quality of interpersonal relationships (for a review, see Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). These dimensions include Neuroticism (nervous, moody), Extraversion (sociable, energetic, cheerful), Openness (curious, imaginative), Agreeableness (kind, trusting), and Conscientiousness (organized, reliable). A number of studies of U.S. samples have revealed associations between the Big 5 dimensions and Facebook use and experiences (Marshall, Lefringhausen, & Ferenczi, 2015; Seidman, 2013), and thus we controlled for these aspects of personality when testing associations of maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism with new mothers' Facebook use and experience. We also controlled for maternal age and education, demographic variables that have been shown to relate to online social networking in studies using U.S. convenience samples of new mothers (McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2012) and undergraduate students from a Midwestern university (Brooks, Welser, Hogan, & Titsworth, 2011).

In addition to research examining predictors of Facebook use, an emerging literature has examined psychological outcomes. A small but increasing number of studies have linked Facebook use with lower well-being for individuals (Kross et al., 2013), including parents (Bartholomew et al., 2012). Our study uses depressive symptoms as an indicator of maternal well-being given the prevalence of depression in the early postpartum period (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010). For new mothers higher in maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism, their self-worth may be contingent on external validation, which may put them at risk for depressive symptoms (Sanchez & Crocker, 2005; Sturman, Flett, Hewitt, & Rudolph, 2009). These mothers' search for external validation may lead them to Facebook, a platform in which they may feel like they can control the social judgments they receive. However, the fragile self-worth of these mothers is unlikely to be stabilized even in the face of positive feedback regarding their roles as mothers, and more likely to be adversely impacted by negative feedback (or the perceived absence of positive feedback). Thus, these mothers' greater Facebook use and more intense Facebook experiences may serve as a mechanism via which their search for external validation undermines their well-being.

The Present Study

Our primary aim was to further understand how the extent to which mothers may feel accountable for doing motherhood is associated with their use and experiences of the popular social networking site Facebook, and whether Facebook activity and reactivity were in turn associated with poorer maternal well-being. *Facebook activity* at the transition to parenthood was measured via frequency of content management and frequency of child photo uploads. As additional indicators of Facebook use, we queried mothers regarding their perceptions of change in Facebook use across the transition, the timing of when they uploaded a first photo of their child, and whether or not they had featured their child in their Facebook profile picture. *Facebook reactivity* was assessed by tapping mothers' emotional responses to acknowledgements they received to the photos of their children that they posted.

In our study we used data from a subsample of new mothers with Facebook accounts that was drawn from a larger study of U.S. Midwestern, dual-earner, male-female couples who made the transition to parenthood in 2008–2009. Thus, the mothers we studied were socioeconomically advantaged relative to new mothers in the general U.S. population and were disproportionately White. However, our sample provided an excellent context in which to examine doing motherhood online because intensive mothering norms are particularly prominent for middle- and upper-class White women (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996). In addition, we focused on mothers (vs. fathers) in the current study because 87% of the mothers in our study reported that they were primarily responsible for managing photos of their child on Facebook.

We conducted a series of hierarchical regression and mediation analyses to test a series of specific hypotheses. Hypothesis 1: Net of controls, new mothers higher in maternal identity confirmation (1a) will engage in more frequent Facebook activity, (1b) will perceive an increase in Facebook use across the transition to parenthood, (1c) will upload the first

picture of their infant to Facebook earlier, (1d) will be more likely to feature their child in their Facebook profile picture, and (1e) will be more reactive to commentary on uploaded photos of their infants. Hypothesis 2: Net of controls, new mothers higher in societal-oriented parenting perfectionism (2a) will engage in more frequent Facebook activity, (2b) will perceive an increase in Facebook use across the transition to parenthood, (2c) will upload the first picture of their infant to Facebook earlier, (2d) will be more likely to feature their child in their Facebook profile picture, and (2e) will be more reactive to commentary on uploaded photos of their infants. Hypothesis 3: New mothers' Facebook activity (3a) and reactivity (3b) will mediate relations of maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism with depressive symptoms.

Method

Participants

Data were derived from a longitudinal study of 182 dual-earner, different-gender couples undergoing the transition to parenthood that was conducted between 2008 and 2010. To participate, couples were required to be (a) expecting their first child, (b) the biological parents of the child they were expecting, (c) married or cohabiting, (d) both engaging in paid work full-time and both expecting to return to paid work postpartum, (e) at least 18 years of age, and (f) able to read and speak English. Expectant couples were recruited primarily via childbirth education classes, newspaper advertisements, doctors' offices, and health clinics.

Participants completed a series of questionnaires in the third trimester of pregnancy and then again at 3 months, 6 months, and 9 months postpartum. At 9 months (the fourth and final phase of the study), 154 mothers completed questionnaires regarding their Facebook use and experiences. Because the current study focused on new mothers' Facebook use and experiences, only those mothers who indicated they had a Facebook account at the time of data collection at 9 months postpartum ($n = 127$) were included in the sample we used for the present study.

Demographic information for these 127 mothers was obtained at the first phase of the study, when mothers were in their third trimester of pregnancy, and is reported in detail in Table 1. Mothers were between the ages of 18 and 37 years ($M = 27.80$, $SD = 3.77$). The majority of mothers identified as White (86%). Concerning education, 77% of mothers reported having obtained at least a college degree. No significant differences in demographics were found between the 127 mothers who reported having a Facebook account at 9 months postpartum and those in the broader dataset who did not, with one exception: not surprisingly, new mothers who reported having Facebook accounts ($M = 27.80$, $SD = 3.77$) were significantly younger than excluded new mothers who reported not having Facebook accounts ($M = 30.04$, $SD = 4.90$), $t(150) = -2.61$, $p < .05$.

Procedures

As part of the larger study, new mothers were surveyed about their psychological characteristics in the third trimester of pregnancy and their adjustment to parenthood postpartum. With respect to the variables of interest in the present study, mothers completed

questionnaires measuring personality and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism in their third trimester of pregnancy. At 9 months postpartum, mothers completed questionnaires measuring their maternal identity confirmation and Facebook use and experience. In addition, postpartum mothers completed a brief measure of depressive symptoms at both 3 and 9 months.

Measures

Maternal identity confirmation—Mothers' maternal identity confirmation was measured using the 4-item Maternal Identity Confirmation subscale of the Maternal Gatekeeping Scale (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Maternal Identity Confirmation taps how strongly a woman's feelings of worth as a spouse/partner and mother are influenced by an orderly household and the judgments of family and friends: "I know people make judgments about how good of a partner/mother I am based on how well cared for my house and family are," "If visitors dropped in unexpectedly and my house was a mess I would be embarrassed," "When my family looks well-groomed in public I feel very proud," and "I care about what my neighbors, extended family, and friends think about the way I perform my household tasks." Mothers self-reported the degree to which these four statements resembled their thinking using a 4-point scale from 1 (*not at like me*) to 4 (*very much like me*). Data from these four items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .71. Scores on these four items were averaged to create a mean score on maternal identity confirmation for each participant such that higher scores indicated a greater need for identity confirmation from external sources.

Societal-oriented parenting perfectionism—Mothers' societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was measured using four items from the Societal Prescribed Parenting Perfectionism subscale of the Multidimensional Parenting Perfectionism Questionnaire (Snell et al., 2005). Items on this subscale focus on parents' beliefs that society in general expects them to be a perfect parent. Using a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*), mothers self-reported the degree to which four statements reflecting beliefs about society and parenting were characteristic of their thinking: "Only if I am a 'perfect' parent will society consider me a good parent," "Most people expect me to always be an excellent parent," "In order for people to accept me I have to be the greatest parent in the world," and "Most people expect me to be perfectionistic when it comes to being a parent." Data from these items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .80. Scores on these four items were averaged to create mean scores on societal-oriented parenting perfectionism for participants, such that higher scores reflected a stronger belief that society holds them to excessively high standards for parenting.

Facebook use and experience—Mothers' Facebook use and experience was measured using the Online Social Networking of New Parents questionnaire (Bartholomew et al., 2012). This 22-item questionnaire examined important aspects of new parents' online social networking, asking participants to respond to each question thinking of their experiences and uses of Facebook, Myspace, or both. Because Myspace use was very infrequent (Bartholomew et al., 2012), we analyzed only responses to the Facebook questions.

We focused on questions that tapped frequency of Facebook activity, child-related Facebook use concerning the sharing of photos, and emotional responses to Facebook friends' acknowledgements of child photos. Fully 98% of mothers in our study indicated they had uploaded photos of their infant to Facebook. As described in Bartholomew et al. (2012), new mothers were asked both how frequently they managed the content of their Facebook and how often they uploaded photos of their child to Facebook, using rating scales from 1 (*frequently throughout the day*) to 8 (*a few times a year*). Responses to these two items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated more frequent Facebook activity. Because these two items were strongly correlated, $r(121) = .63, p < .01$, we summed them together to create a total score reflecting Facebook activity. Although this scale was created by adding two explicitly non-interval response scales, response distributions for all individual items in the current study that utilized an explicitly non-interval frequency response scale were similar in form to response distributions from items with implicitly interval scales measuring continuous constructs (i.e., response distributions tended to be unimodal, roughly symmetrical, and superficially consistent with normality).

As another indicator of Facebook use, mothers reported whether their Facebook usage changed since their child's birth, using a scale from 1 (*much less*) through 3 (*same*) to 5 (*much more*). Mothers were also asked to report when they had first uploaded a photo of their child to Facebook ("When did you first upload a photo/photos of your child to Facebook?") and could select the following responses: the day of my child's birth (coded 1), less than 3 days after the birth of my child (2), less than one week after the birth of my child (3), my child was ___ weeks old, or never. No respondents chose "never." The responses of mothers who wrote in a specific number of weeks were further categorized into 4 (*one month or less*), 5 (*three months or less*), 6 (*six months or less*), and 7 (*nine months or less*). Mothers were also asked whether they had ever featured their child in their Facebook profile picture: "Has your child ever been featured in your Facebook and/or Myspace profile picture?" Possible responses included "Facebook," "Myspace," "Both," or "Neither." Responses indicating "Facebook" or "Both" were scored 1 (*yes*), whereas responses indicating "Neither" were scored 0 (*no*).

Two additional items tapped how mothers felt when uploaded photos of their child received more or fewer comments than they expected. In particular, mothers used a 7-point scale, from 1 (*disappointed*) through 4 (*neutral*) to 7 (*pleased*) to respond to these two items: "When photos of my child get more comments than I expect, I feel..." and "When photos of my child get fewer comments than I expect, I feel..." To create a measure of Facebook reactivity, the first item was reverse scored and those scores were added to scores on the second item. In support of this calculation, the original items were significantly associated, $r(123) = -.22, p < .05$. Thus, our measure of Facebook reactivity had a possible range from 2 to 14, such that higher scores indicated stronger reactivity.

Depressive symptoms—At 3 and 9 months postpartum, mothers completed a brief 5-item version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies – Depression scale (CES-D; Bonomi, Kernic, Anderson, Cannon, & Slesnick, 2008). Mothers responded to five statements (e.g., "I felt depressed") by indicating the amount of time during the prior week they had felt this way from 0 (*Rarely or none of the time*) to 3 (*Most or all of the time*). Cronbach's alpha

was .70 at 3 months and at 9 months. Scores on these five items were summed to create separate total scores for depressive symptoms at 3 and 9 months, wherein higher scores indicated elevated levels of depression.

Control variables—Demographic control variables included maternal age and education. Maternal age in years was calculated by subtracting the participant's birth date from her participation date. To assess education level, mothers responded to the following question, "Which best describes your current level of education (circle one)?" Mothers could choose from the following ordered categories: less than high school, high school degree or GED, vocational or tech program, some college, associate's degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctorate degree (or equivalent).

Mothers' personality was assessed using the Neuroticism Extraversion Openness Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992), a widely used, reliable, and valid measure of the Big 5 dimensions of personality. This measure consists of five subscales containing 12 items each, with each item rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Items on each subscale were averaged to create a mean score on each of the five dimensions for each participant, such that higher scores indicated higher levels of the personality trait measured. In the current sample, internal consistency reliabilities were acceptable: Neuroticism (e.g., "I often feel tense and jittery"; $\alpha = .87$), Extraversion (e.g., "I laugh easily"; $\alpha = .79$), Openness (e.g., "I often try new and foreign foods"; $\alpha = .73$), Agreeableness (e.g., "I try to be courteous to everyone I meet"; $\alpha = .84$), and Conscientiousness (e.g., "I strive for excellence in everything I do"; $\alpha = .84$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Measures of central tendency and variability for key variables are presented in Table 2, and correlations among key variables are presented in Table 3. Maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism each yielded a wide range of responses. On average, mothers described statements reflecting maternal identity confirmation as between "a little like me" and "like me," and statements reflecting societal-oriented parenting perfectionism as "somewhat characteristic" of them.

With respect to the dependent variables, mothers' reports of the frequency of their Facebook activity reflected a wide range, with the median activity indicating that the typical mother reported managing content and uploading photos a "few times a month." Whereas some mothers reported using Facebook "much less" and other mothers reported using Facebook "much more" since the birth of their first child, the average new mother experienced a slight increase in their Facebook use across the transition to parenthood according to their retrospective reports. The typical mother reported first uploading a photo of her infant to Facebook within one week of her child's birth. Fully 80% ($n = 98$) of mothers who had ever uploaded a photo of their child further reported having featured their child in their profile picture. Concerning mothers' reactivity to their Facebook friends' commentary on uploaded photos of their infant, the typical mother reported feeling somewhat pleased when uploaded

photos received more comments than expected and somewhat displeased when uploaded photos received fewer comments than expected.

Regression Analyses

To test our hypotheses, which predicted that new mothers higher in maternal identity confirmation (Hypothesis 1) and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism (Hypothesis 2) would engage in more frequent Facebook activity, would perceive an increase in Facebook use across the transition to parenthood, would upload the first picture of their infant to Facebook earlier, would be more likely to feature their child in their Facebook profile picture, and would be more reactive to commentary on uploaded photos of their infants, we computed a series of regression equations (see Table 4). We used hierarchical linear regression analyses to predict each measure of Facebook use and experience, with the exception of the dichotomous dependent variable reflecting whether the child had been featured in the mother's profile picture (which was predicted using binary logistic regression).

On the first step of each equation, the demographic control variables of maternal age and education were entered. On the second step, the psychological control variables (i.e., the Big 5 personality dimensions) were entered. On the third step, mothers' maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism were entered simultaneously to examine if this set of variables explained significant variance in mothers' Facebook use and experiences above and beyond both sets of control variables.

Results indicated that a statistically significant 13% of the variance in the frequency of new mothers' Facebook activity was explained by the demographic control variables, with greater maternal education significantly associated with less frequent activity. The addition of the Big 5 personality dimensions on Step 2 did not explain significant variance in new mothers' Facebook activity; however, the variables entered on Step 3 did explain a significant additional 7% of the variance in Facebook activity. Maternal identity confirmation ($\beta = .21, p = .019$) and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism ($\beta = .19, p = .046$) were each positively and significantly associated with mothers' frequency of Facebook activity, consistent with Hypotheses 1a and 2a.

Concerning perceived changes in mothers' Facebook use across the transition to parenthood, neither set of control variables entered on the first two steps explained significant variance in self-reported change in Facebook use. Moreover, neither maternal identity confirmation nor societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was a significant predictor of perceived change in mothers' Facebook use. Thus, Hypotheses 1b and 2b were not supported. Regarding how soon mothers reported uploading a picture of their child to Facebook after their child's birth, the demographic control variables entered on Step 1 accounted for 5% of the variance, an amount that approached statistical significance ($p = .056$), but which was not significant. Of these variables, only maternal age was significantly and positively associated with the timing of uploading of the first child photo ($\beta = .26, p = .017$). The Big 5 personality variables entered on Step 2 accounted for an additional statistically significant 15% of the variance in how soon mothers uploaded a photo of their child to Facebook. Of the Big 5 dimensions, neuroticism was significantly and negatively associated (i.e., mothers uploaded pictures

sooner after birth) with the timing of this first uploading ($\beta = -.31, p = .002$). Neither maternal identity confirmation nor societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was a significant predictor of the timing of the first child photo uploaded by mothers, thus failing to support Hypotheses 1c and 2c.

Regarding whether or not mothers reported having ever featured their child in their Facebook profile picture, the logistic regression model including the demographic control variables, the Big 5 personality dimensions, and key variables of interest revealed that the only significant predictor was maternal identity confirmation, which was significant at $p = .036$, $OR = 2.50$. This means that the odds were two-and-a-half times greater for a mother to have featured her child in her profile picture for each one-point increase in maternal identity confirmation, thus supporting Hypothesis 1d.

The demographic control variables of maternal age and education did not explain significant variance in mothers' reactivity to comments on uploaded photos of their child, and neither did the set of Big 5 personality dimensions. However, the variables entered on Step 3 explained a significant 11% of the variance in mothers' Facebook reactivity. In particular, mothers who had greater maternal identity confirmation ($\beta = .29, p = .002$) and greater societal-oriented parenting perfectionism ($\beta = .21, p = .032$) reacted more strongly to comments on uploaded photos of their children, thus supporting Hypotheses 1e and 2e.

In sum, our findings supported Hypotheses 1a, 1d, 1e, 2a, and 2e. New mothers higher in maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism did engage in more frequent Facebook activity and reacted more strongly to Facebook commentary. In addition, mothers with greater maternal identity confirmation were more likely to have ever featured their child in their Facebook profile picture. However, maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism were not significant predictors of perceived change in Facebook use across the transition to parenthood and the timing of the first infant photo upload.

Mediation Analyses

To test Hypotheses 3a and 3b, which predicted that new mothers' Facebook activity and reactivity would mediate relations of maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism with depressive symptoms, we conducted mediation analyses using the SPSS Macro "Mediate" (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). This method computes the indirect effect as the product of the path coefficient linking the independent variable and the mediator as well as the path coefficient linking the mediator and the dependent variable. We used bootstrapping to obtain 5000 random samples to derive estimates of the indirect effects and their 95% confidence intervals. We simultaneously tested the significance of the indirect effects of maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism on depressive symptoms at 9 months postpartum via Facebook activity and reactivity while controlling for depressive symptoms at an earlier time point (3 months postpartum).

Results indicated that the indirect effects of maternal identity confirmation (95% CI [0.0013, 0.3877]) and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism (95% CI [0.0003, 0.2502]) on mothers' depressive symptoms via Facebook activity were significant. However, the indirect

effects of maternal identity confirmation (95% CI [-0.1243, 0.3167]) and mothers' societal-oriented parenting perfectionism (95% CI [-0.0493, 0.1665]) on mothers' depressive symptoms via Facebook reactivity were not significant. As additional sensitivity tests, we also conducted mediation analyses with depressive symptoms as the mediator and Facebook activity and reactivity as the dependent variables, but none of the indirect effects of maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism on Facebook use via depressive symptoms was significant. Thus, Hypothesis 3a was supported: greater maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism were associated with greater Facebook activity for new mothers, which was in turn associated with increases in depressive symptoms over the first 9 months of parenthood. However, Hypothesis 3b was not supported: new mothers' Facebook reactivity did not appear to serve as a mechanism through which maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism were linked to greater depressive symptoms.

Discussion

In summary, our study revealed notable differences between new young mothers in their use and experience of Facebook. We found that higher levels of maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism were associated with greater Facebook activity, even after accounting for demographic controls and the Big 5 personality dimensions. We found that these same mothers also experienced greater emotional reactivity to Facebook commentary. Furthermore, we found that new mothers' Facebook activity significantly mediated relations of maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism with depressive symptoms. Our findings are consistent with prior research indicating that Facebook use may undermine well-being (Kross et al., 2013) and is associated with greater parenting stress for new mothers (Bartholomew et al., 2012).

Our study underscored how the gender accountability structure pervades women's lives through a new virtual online platform. People aim to practice gender in ways that not only will gain acceptance and reduce social sanctions but also will receive praise by others (Hollander, 2013; Ridgeway, 2011). Facebook, therefore, acts as another outlet by which women, particularly those who seek greater external validation for their domestic roles, can affirm that they are doing motherhood correctly or normatively. But, these women also tend to be the most sensitive to others' reactions to their gender practices. We found that new mothers who sought validation for their domestic roles reported feeling more pleased when uploaded photos of their child received more comments than expected and more displeased when uploaded photos of their child received fewer comments than expected. Positive reactions to uploaded content reinforces that women gain praise through doing motherhood; yet, at the same time, these new mothers may feel that others are not holding up their end of the gender bargain when they do not reward their Facebook content through comments.

As anticipated, new mothers high in societal-oriented parenting perfectionism, or those who endorsed the belief that society holds them to excessively high standards for parenting, also reported more Facebook activity and emotional reactivity even after taking mothers' age, education, and personality into account. The fact that these associations appeared distinct from those linking maternal identity confirmation with Facebook use and experience

supports the notion that societal-oriented parenting perfectionism may be tapping into felt pressures associated more specifically with intensive mothering norms (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996). Given that high levels of societal-oriented perfectionism reflect a strong preoccupation with social judgment (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2015), mothers who believe they are being held to standards of perfection would be motivated to use Facebook to show their social circle that they are being the best mothers possible for their children.

Regardless of these distinctions, we further found that greater maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism were associated with increases in depressive symptoms indirectly via new mothers' greater Facebook activity. For new mothers higher in maternal identity confirmation and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism, who are especially sensitive to the gender accountability structure, their self-worth is contingent on external validation (Sanchez & Crocker, 2005; Sturman et al., 2009). These mothers may seek the readily available validation Facebook promises for their strong investment in the domestic sphere and confirmation that they are meeting society's impossibly high standards for parenting. However, their dependence on external validation via Facebook activity, which will never bolster their fragile self-worth, ultimately undermines their well-being.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although our study revealed novel and important associations between new young mothers' psychological characteristics, their use and experience of Facebook as a platform for doing motherhood, and their well-being, interpretations of the current study's results must be made in the context of its limitations. The sample for our study was not (nor was intended to be) representative of the general population of new mothers in the United States. Given study inclusion criteria, mothers in our sample had relatively high levels of education and most (86%) identified as White. Thus, we cannot be certain that our results would generalize to the broader population of new mothers in the United States. However, the sample of mothers used in our study was particularly well-suited for examining the questions we addressed, especially because intensive mothering norms are especially prominent for U.S. middle- and upper-class White women (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Future research should examine associations between new mothers' psychological characteristics, Facebook activity, and depressive symptoms in other populations to understand variations or similarities between demographic groups.

Moreover, our study concentrated on the ways in which gender accountability structures permeate and affect women's lives through a new social networking platform. It is possible that Facebook does not provide a similarly effective platform for men to do gender, or even that doing fatherhood involves explicitly refraining from posting baby-related content. Future research should more explicitly examine how men do fatherhood in online spaces, and whether patterns of Facebook use for fathers appear similarly consequential for their well-being.

It is also important to acknowledge our study's methodological limitations. We did not measure new mothers' Facebook use and content directly (i.e., by gaining access to their profiles or accounts); instead, we asked mothers to report retrospectively on their Facebook

use and experience across the first 9 months of their child's life. In his analysis of the correspondence between actual and self-reported measures of Facebook use, however, Junco (2013) reported a significant, strong positive correlation between reported and actual Facebook use in a sample of college students enrolled in a public university in the U.S. Northeast. Moreover, although the core Facebook experience has remained largely unchanged since its inception (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012), our data on the Facebook use of new parents were collected 6 years ago, and Facebook will continue to develop and change. Finally, our measure of societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was collected only once and during the third trimester of pregnancy; thus, we could not examine potential changes in parenting perfectionism that may result from actual motherhood experiences. Longitudinal studies with multiple time points of measurement would be better positioned to examine how the social feedback mothers receive via Facebook and other parenting experiences might affect change in mothers' sensitivity to the gender accountability structure.

Practice Implications

Our study has identified mothers, among a certain demographic group, that may be particularly susceptible to detrimental effects from Facebook use and experiences. Our findings suggest that it may be helpful for new mothers to track their Facebook usage after the birth of their child and evaluate their emotional states surrounding their use of this online platform. Being aware of negative and positive emotions connected to Facebook could help facilitate usage changes, if necessary. When treating new mothers, practitioners could also inquire about new mothers' Facebook activities and encourage mothers, if necessary, to seek out other rewarding and validating social experiences outside the cyber world (Kross et al., 2013).

Even if mothers do limit their time on Facebook, many may still experience social pressures (requests from family and friends) to maintain high levels of social media activity. Considering that fully 87% of mothers in our sample reported that they were primarily responsible for managing photos of their child on Facebook, mothers can encourage partners to share this responsibility or take the lead. Shifting some or all of this responsibility may alleviate some of the stress or greater depressive symptoms some women encounter after the transition to parenthood. Broader societal changes are necessary to expand the degree to which others validate women (and the extent to which women seek validation) for their many other critical contributions to society in addition to motherhood (e.g., paid employment, community involvement).

Conclusions

Our study has provided important insights into conceptualizations of doing gender. Facebook not only acts as a platform by which individual women strengthen their feminine identity and ties to motherhood, but also acts as a structure that solidifies cultural norms through replicated gendered interactions. When women post photos of their children, social actors reinforce the importance of motherhood to both the women who make the postings and other people who can view their postings and the attention that follows. By merging an

individual differences approach with the doing gender perspective, our study has identified new mothers who may be most active in doing gender via this avenue, and therefore more likely to experience potential drawbacks of Facebook interactions. Considering the stress that often coincides with transitioning to parenthood, our study contributes to our broader understanding of how new mothers' efforts at social connection and validation unfold in cyberspace.

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Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N = 127)

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	109	85.8
Black	7	5.5
Asian	2	1.6
Other Race	3	2.4
Mixed Race	6	4.7
Hispanic Ethnicity	5	4.0
Weekly Work Hours (9 months)		
Not Employed	13	10.6
0–10 hours	6	4.9
11–20 hours	11	8.9
21–30 hours	15	12.2
31–40 hours	44	35.8
41–50 hours	32	26.0
over 50 hours	2	1.6
Marital Status		
Yes (Married)	110	86.6
No (Cohabiting)	17	13.4
Education		
less than high school	1	0.8
high school degree	3	2.4
vocational or tech program	3	2.4
some college	17	13.4
Associate's degree	5	3.9
Bachelor's degree	57	44.9
Master's degree	33	26.0
Ph.D. or equivalent	8	6.3
Age in years (range = 18–37)	<i>M</i> = 27.80	<i>SD</i> = 3.77
Household income (range = \$14k–\$238k)	\$84745.10	\$42904.84

Note. Participants could not identify their race and/or ethnicity; thus, these values add to > 127.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variables	Measures of Central Tendency and Variability		Possible Minimum	Possible Maximum	Observed Minimum	Observed Maximum
Maternal identity confirmation	$M = 2.62$	$SD = .71$	1.00	4.00	1.25	4.00
Societal-oriented parenting perfectionism	$M = 2.38$	$SD = .89$	1.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Neuroticism	$M = 2.57$	$SD = .67$	1.00	5.00	1.17	4.58
Extraversion	$M = 3.59$	$SD = .51$	1.00	5.00	1.92	4.83
Openness	$M = 3.25$	$SD = .50$	1.00	5.00	2.00	4.58
Agreeableness	$M = 4.00$	$SD = .52$	1.00	5.00	2.50	4.92
Conscientiousness	$M = 3.93$	$SD = .52$	1.00	5.00	1.67	4.83
Depressive symptoms at 3 months	$M = 2.00$	$SD = 2.23$	0.00	15.00	0.00	12.00
Depressive symptoms at 9 months	$M = 1.94$	$SD = 2.14$	0.00	15.00	0.00	10.00
Facebook activity frequency	$Mdn = 6.00$	Mode = 4.00	2.00	16.00	2.00	13.00
Change in use since child's birth	$Mdn = 3.00$	Mode = 4.00	1.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
When first uploaded photo of child	$Mdn = 3.00$	Mode = 3.00	1.00	7.00	1.00	7.00
Facebook reactivity	$Mdn = 1.00$	Mode = 11.00	2.00	14.00	8.00	14.00
Featured child in profile picture	Mode = 1.00	80.3%	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00

Table 3

Intercorrelations of Key Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Age	--															
2. Education	.47**	--														
3. ID conf	-.07	-.10	--													
4. SOPP	-.11	.12	.08	--												
5. Neuroticism	.09	-.07	.18**	.28**	--											
6. Extraversion	-.05	.10	.11	.03	-.25**	--										
7. Openness	-.03	-.02	-.11	-.02	-.04	.00	--									
8. Agreeableness	.20*	.31**	-.04	-.21*	-.26**	.14	-.10	--								
9. Consc	.06	.28**	.12	.08	-.38**	.22*	-.27**	.21*	--							
10. Dep 3 mos	.06	-.02	.17	.23*	.51**	-.11	-.05	-.17	-.18	--						
11. Dep 9 mos	-.14	-.19*	.08	.02	.46**	-.17	.02	-.21*	-.26**	.55**	--					
12. FB Activity	-.28**	-.30**	.25**	.23*	.16	.11	.08	-.21*	-.20*	.20*	.24**	--				
13. FB Change	.02	-.02	.15	.08	-.02	.02	-.01	-.09	.07	-.06	.01	.19*	--			
14. First photo	.17	-.05	-.06	-.27**	-.30**	.04	-.09	.24*	.07	-.32**	-.16	-.24*	.30**	--		
15. FB Reactivity	-.13	-.13	.35**	.21*	.19*	.04	.08	.02	-.10	.08	.10	.25**	.16	-.10	--	
16. Profile picture	-.07	-.14	.22*	.11	.15	.08	-.12	-.06	.03	.04	.03	.20*	.05	-.15	.15	--
<i>n</i>	126	127	127	124	125	125	125	125	125	122	126	121	124	116	123	122

Note. *ns* vary due to missing data. ID conf = identity confirmation; SOPP = societal-oriented parenting perfectionism; Consc = conscientiousness; Dep = depressive symptoms; FB = Facebook.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 4
 Hierarchical Regressions Predicting New Mothers' Facebook Use and Experience

Predictors	Activity Frequency			Change in Use Since Child's Birth			When First Uploaded Photo of Child			Comment Reactivity		
	β	R^2	F	β	R^2	F	β	R^2	F	β	R^2	F
Step 1		.13	8.40**		.00	.07		.05	2.95		.03	1.53
Age	-.18			.03			.26*					-.10
Education	-.23*			-.03			-.15					-.08
Step 2		.07	1.83		.02	.42		.15	3.72**		.07	1.61
Neuroticism	.15			-.01			-.31**					.25*
Extraversion	.16			.02			-.01					.07
Openness	.04			.00			-.10					.09
Agreeableness	-.08			-.13			.18					.15
Conscientiousness	-.11			.08			-.06					.00
Step 3		.07	4.97**		.03	1.66		.01	.42		.11	7.70**
ID confirmation	.21*			.17			.01					.29**
SOPP	.19*			.06			-.09					.21*
Overall F		$F(9,107) = 4.27$ **		$F(9,109) = 0.62$			$F(9,101) = 2.87$ *				$F(9,108) = 3.11$ *	

Note. ID = identity; SOPP = societal-oriented parenting perfectionism. VIF values ranged from 1.07 to 1.60.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

$p < .10$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$