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Parents' Growing Pains on Social Media: Modeling Authenticity

Jenn Supple Bartels

Abstract

Parents' Growing Pains on Social Media: Modeling Authenticity addresses the question of what it means to parent with integrity in a digital environment. Issues of disclosure, boundaries, identity, and authenticity all contribute to a consideration of locating the ethical line in creating a digital footprint for others (specifically our children).

It started innocently enough. Parents dabbling in social media, posting a status update about their child here, a baby photo there; then came faux Facebook and Twitter accounts for those same babies and toddlers (written by those same parents) (Bazon), Mom Blogs, and BabiesofInstagram. The backlash soon followed: STFU Parents, Top 10 Reasons I Hate Mommy Blogs, and Unbaby.me (Lawler). Some parents joined the backlash, decried this “oversharenting,” and attempted to create a virtual tabula rasa for their children’s eventual foray into social media (Webb). Other parents defended their right to share about their children what they wanted, where they wanted, and as often as they wanted (Perez).

Regardless of which side of this debate one falls—blank slate or open book—it is clear parents are a formidable force on social media and are using it to share things about their children (“Digital Lives”). According to a 2010 study by internet security firm AVG, 92% of children in the United States have an online presence (due to their parents’ disclosure) by the time they are two years old, and for 33% this presence was established before they were born via prenatal sonograms (“Digital Birth”).

The Internet has been described as the ultimate identity workshop, a stage on which a variety of roles can be enacted, and a gallery allowing for a multiple selves to be designed and displayed (Bruckman). Navigating this process with integrity is a challenge for any online individual. Parents have the added weight of negotiating not only their own identities, but also those of the children they choose to share about on social media. What does it mean to parent with integrity in an omnipresent and enduring online environment? How are parents to balance using social media for the purpose of updating family and friends about their life, which includes their children, with respecting the boundaries of those not old enough to understand and/or provide consent to that disclosure? Where is the ethical line in creating a digital footprint for others? As a parent, I have taken each of them to the mat in my own life, and rarely emerged confident of victory.

Social Media and the “Other”

Since beginning to explore the issue of parents disclosing about their children online, I’ve heard multiple variations on the following: “Is this really that big of a deal? It’s social media. That’s what it’s there for. Besides, how does posting a photo or telling a story about your child online differ from what people say and do in real life?” Good points and fair questions. In my family, we have a ritual of divulging embarrassing stories and photos about any family member who dares bring a date home to meet other family

members. Timelines for bedwetting, stories about sports failures, and photos of early cross-dressing are hauled out with military precision. Aren't those embarrassing? Don't they involve an audience? Isn't their sharing facilitated by parents in a social environment? Of course; but online social media is different in both scope and permanency. What is amusing and momentary in face-to-face interaction takes on a greater significance when the audience increases to nearly 2 billion internet users world-wide and the disclosure is, in effect, un-erasable ("World Internet Users"). Given both the scope and permanency of the ever-evolving technological landscape, parenting with integrity on social media will always be a moving target. However, the self-reflective and other-oriented practice of authenticity can aid those struggling with hitting this target, even if defining authenticity is equally challenging.

Sociologists Phillip Vannini and Alexis Franzese note there is "no single theory of authenticity and a multitude of definitions." Of these multiple definitions of authenticity, the most concise is "being true to one's self." Vannini and Franzese acknowledge authenticity as both a feeling and a practice that includes "sincerity, truthfulness, and originality" that must take into account both the self and the other (1621). The "other" in parents disclosing about their children on social media includes the minors as both topic and audience of this information. Communication scholar Julia T. Wood acknowledges online behavior is always a cooperative action "in relationship to others" (110).

While online behavior may occur in relationship to others, cooperative action between adult author and audience members on social media obviously differs from the dynamic that exists between parents as adult authors and their minor children as disclosure topics. The latter dynamic exemplifies the role of power in dichotomous social order described by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in which "the second member is but the other of the first" (14). In this context, adult authors are the norm and

their children the “other.” In *Saints and Postmodernism*, feminist communitarian scholar Edith Wyschogrod asserts that the “Other” is “the touchstone of moral existence...not a conceptual anchorage but a living force” whose existence is tied to “compelling moral weight” (Wyschogrod xxi). This weight is the compelling force behind this paper’s exploration of how the parents can use the practice of authenticity to guide disclosure about their children on social media.¹

Awareness: When is it About You?

The first step in parenting authentically in a digital environment involves the self-reflective awareness that disclosing about one’s children on social media is sometimes more about the parent than the child. For example, a Facebook user named Vanessa announces the birth of her son, Jayden, on that site. The first

Vanessa [redacted]
Lil baby Jayden [redacted] and a head full of hair. And of course, he came into this world via 100% natural, non-medicated childbirth!



Mobile Uploads

Share · 15 hours ago via BlackBerry · 🌟

Deborah [redacted] and 26 others like this.

View all 25 comments

Nick [redacted] · Congrats!
41 minutes ago

Deborah [redacted] · What a cutie! Congrats, and you rock!
10 minutes ago

sentence of this post introduces “Lil baby Jayden” and his “head full of hair.” While the subject of the second sentence is still officially Jayden, his mom Vanessa wants you to know something about herself: she is the type of mother who produced a child “via 100% natural, non-medicated childbirth!” (Koenig

“Birth”). The work of sociologist Erving Goffman clarifies what is happening here.

According to Goffman, humans are social creatures who naturally act in ways that “convey an impression to others”—a practice that has come to be referred to in varying circles as impression management, self-presentation, and identity performance (*Presentation 3*). For Goffman, these impressions, presentations, and performances are natural ways of signaling socially constructed and multidimensional identities, which are embodied in three distinct but related “orders” (Jenkins 17):

- The personal (individual order) dimension of identity consists of those characteristics that people believe make them unique (organized, introverted, or homely);
- The relational (interaction order) dimension of identity locates us in relationship with others (child-parent, brother-sister, student-teacher);
- The communal (institutional order) dimension of identity is based on larger group membership or association (ethnicity, religion, organizations). (Hecht *et al.*)

Goffman points out that society is structured to reward the performance of certain roles within each of these dimensions of identity, while punishing the performance of others (*Presentation 6*). In Vanessa’s case, she is rewarded for her performance of “100% natural, non-medicated childbirth.” The second commentator following her post, Deborah, acknowledges the dual subject matter of Vanessa’s initial post by applying the same format in her response: (first sentence = Jayden) “What a cutie!” (Second sentence = Vanessa) “Congrats! You rock!” (Koenig “Birth”).

At the same time, obvious identity performance like Vanessa’s is often seen negatively, as something false, inauthentic, or manipulative (Crant). Interestingly, in J. Michael Crant’s work on impression management evoking a negative response, he notes

that “paradoxically, given the phrase ‘impression management,’ little research has explicitly examined observers’ impression of impression managers” (1446). Despite this hole in the scholarly literature, social media is rife with responses to parents’ online identity involving their children.

The most well-known site presently devoted to such response is *STFU, Parents*. It began as a blog by Blair Koenig chronicling the overt self-presentation done by parents online, primarily on Facebook. It has since expanded to include a Facebook page of its own, Twitter account, and book entitled *STFU, Parents: The Jaw-Droppingly, Self-Indulgent, and Occasionally Rage-Inducing World of Parent Overshare*. Vanessa’s post referencing her “100% natural, non-medicated childbirth” was featured on the *STFU, Parents* blog, where her post earned her the ascribed identities of “birth junkie” (one who talks about nothing other than their birthing experiences) and “sanctimama” (one who looks down on the parenting choices of others and considers parents superior to non-parents). One might write off sanctimamas and birth junkies engaging in “mommyjacking” and “mompredictions” as the inevitable culmination of our self-obsessed, helicopter parent, social media addicted culture; however, Koenig predicts:

In a few years, we will probably see a considerable amount of pre-teen overshare from the parents who overshare about their toddlers today. I already see plenty of examples of parents who overshare about their teenagers getting their periods or growing armpit hair, and I'm sure those examples will increase over time. (Erickson)

If Koenig’s predictions are correct, there is all the more reason for parents’ awareness of how they practice their own identity work when posting about their children, whether that work is explicit or implicit. Literature on impression management traditionally focuses on the

"direct" ways individuals actively engage in self-presentation by altering their own behavior (Brown *et al.*). Less discussed is an individual's use of others in their self-presentation, known as "indirect" impression management (Andrews *et al.* 143).

When parents cast their children in a particular role or light to create and manage impressions of themselves, they are engaging in "altercasting" (Weinstein and Deutschberger (454). Most applicably, Jessica Collet examines the ways in which mothers "manage the appearances of their children and how they use those appearances to establish their identities as 'good mothers'" (Collett 332). Children are uniquely suited to serve as impression management markers for parents. If we are the company we keep, then parents' worth can be tied to the accomplishments of their offspring. This has been found to be especially true for mothers, whose children are considered the direct "results of her maternal instincts, her worth as a human being" (Tardy 444). For example, when my oldest son was four years old, I posted a version of the anecdote below on Facebook.

On our way home from M_____ getting a haircut, he decided to bring up politics.

M_____: Do you like President Bush?

Me: I don't have anything against him personally; I'm just not a big fan of some of his ideas.

M_____: Which ideas?

Me: He had this idea for schools, called No Child Left Behind, that was supposed to make sure all kids were learning in schools. That sounds like a good thing, but

he didn't make sure the schools had the money needed to do this idea and then punished them for not being able to do it.

M___: How could he do that?

Me: Well, it's called an unfunded mandate and it's not very fair, is it?

M___: No. I hate unfunded mandates!

The next day I told M___ to brush his teeth and he declared he would not do it because it was an unfunded mandate. I told him he had a toothbrush, toothpaste, and the skills needed to complete the task, so it was completely funded, and to get his butt in the bathroom.

While heading to the bathroom, M___ told me he had nothing against me personally, but he just wasn't a big fan of my ideas. 😊

Charles Horton Cooley's metaphor of the looking-glass self is particularly useful for deconstructing the identity work present in this example. In Cooley's looking glass, an individual's perception of him or herself grows out of their interactions on the relational and communal levels. The three moves made in doing so are an individual imagining how another views them, how that individual imagines being judged as a result of that viewing, and how that individual feels about him or herself as a result of that judgment (Cooley). At the time the Unfunded Mandate Anecdote (UMA) was posted, I was a newly-divorced mother and spent significant amounts of time imagining how others viewed me as a result of my having divorced the father of my young child. I imagined being judged harshly for this choice and felt shame for having been a "bad" wife, mother, daughter, woman, etc. My resulting behavior

was to present a “face” or image of myself that others would find pleasing and hopefully, thereby, reduce that shame (Goffman *Nature*).

Cialdini, Finch, and De Nicholas found that those who had recently undergone an “image-threatening experience” (such as a divorce) were more likely to link themselves to “positively-toned” others in an attempt to sway perception of their public “face,” or identity, known as “facework” (197). At the time of the UMA posting, I was aware of selectively tweaking elements of the anecdote for optimal role embracement, displaying positive “mom” qualities and engaging in appropriate “mom” activities (Snow and Anderson). For this performance, I received “likes” and positive comments ranging from “More M____ stories!!!” to “you need to write a book with the things your son says!” This is not an unusual result of such disclosure, as research by Ringel Morris notes that posts by mothers about their children receive nearly double the positive “attention” (favorable comments and “likes”) than non-child-related posts. My UMA anecdote, while perhaps slightly less overt than Vanessa’s birth announcement, served the same function: to present a self that would be looked upon favorably by disclosing about another (my son).

However, as previously noted, to brag about oneself through one’s children can have negative consequences, unless one is skilled in doing so with delicacy. A form of this that is particularly suited to the self-presentation of social media is the art of “humblebragging,” a term coined and defined by Harris Wittels as a “specific type of brag that masks the boasting part of the statement in a faux-humble guise” (xi). In her *Pregnancy, Parenting, and Lifestyle* blog, *mom.me*, Sally Schultheiss illustrates humblebragging:

“I’m such a boring mom. All we do is stay around the house and craft.”

Translation: I'm such a great mom. I spend quality time with my children doing activities that will benefit them in so many ways.

Another form of this act is one in which the humblebragger seems aggrieved by something that paints them in a positive light.

"I'm so exhausted. I've been up late every night this week helping Ellie study for the spelling bee finals. Shoot me."

Translation: My child is achieving academically as result of my parenting investments, but I'm acting like it's a hardship so you don't hate me for being AWESOME!

Humblebragging can also include the use of photographs as an additional means of managing others' impressions. As writer and mother Hazel Davis admits, "As soon as I'd posted the picture I regretted it. Of course I didn't regret the picture of my darling gorgeous beautiful daughter but the supposedly funny comment beneath it: 'My poor child, covered in dirt. Call social services.' Naturally I didn't mean I was a bad parent. Far from it, in fact I wanted everyone to look at the picture, admire my daughter and then admire how earthy and [outdoorsy](#) we all were." In this example, using her child as an indirect form of self-presentation allowed Davis to claim multiple (favorable) identities: a good mother who spends time with her child, "earthy and "outdoorsy," and, most importantly, humble about it all.

Children serve parents' impression management as props in humblebragging specifically because of their elevated social status as innocent, beautiful creatures whose care is the ultimate self-sacrifice, but also through their limited social status as lacking the full rights of adults and thereby conceding boundary regulation to their parents. According to Goffman, children are often seen as "non-persons," both incomplete and open, in that they can be approached and addressed in ways adults cannot (*Behavior* 104).

Offline, this could manifest itself as children being stared at in public or adults feeling free to chastise or direct the behavior of children not their own. On social media, parents disclose photos and stories about their children that would never be allowed if roles were reversed. I'm relieved to say my experience in social media has not involved my happening across a single account of an adult pooping in a tub. I wish I could say the same about children. These stories are so rampant that an entire section of *STFU, Parents* is devoted to parents' oversharenting about their children's "Bathroom Behavior."

While some may struggle to see what positive self-presentation



Gina and Melissa accomplish in disclosing about their children defecating in the bath ("I'm patient, self-sacrificing, tolerant, loving, etc."), what is hopefully apparent is that this sort of revelation about another adult would be considered unseemly. Gina's daughter and Melissa's son are treated as incomplete and open objects, lacking the position and resources to block or erase this information about themselves. To the argument that Gina and Melissa are their parents and have the right to share this information, I offer counterpoint in the form of an acronym: WYDTAAA. Would You Disclose That About An Adult? If Edith

Wyschgrod is correct that children, by the “mere” basis of their humanity, hold equal moral weight with adults, how can there be separate standards for ethical online disclosure for both? A parent’s right to serve as gatekeeper of information regarding their child does not supercede their responsibility to serve as stewards of that information.

Authenticity: Whose Truth is it?

I once asked a room of very smart people what the definition of authenticity was. The first response was “being honest, telling the truth.” While honesty may be a requisite part of authenticity, it’s not a complete synonym. This is where many of us, parents included, struggle with disclosure on social media. Is “truth” the only requirement for sharing information about ourselves or others online? For others, including children, who decides what constitutes truth and who has the right to tell it?

According to theologian and ethics scholar Dietmar Mieth, both the communication sphere and type of truth claimed must be weighed in answering these questions. The immediate sphere is for personal and discrete disclosure, the group sphere allows for disclosure relative to a specialized community, and the public sphere is where abstract matters may be engaged with potential anonymity (93-94). On social media, personal and discrete disclosure is occurring in group and public spheres, creating a potential scope of audience generally unintended by the author. Mieth also acknowledges that, in regards to “morally responsible interpretation” of truth, “time is another important factor and is mostly overlooked”—which is particularly relevant given the near-permanence of online information (94). What is true in a given moment, within a specific context, is likely not to be the truth of a child’s entire life.

Consider the potential weight of “whose truth is it” when parents are intentionally using social media disclosure to embarrass and shame their children. Take, for example, the mother who posted the following picture of her daughter on her Facebook page. The text on the sign states:



“My name is _____. I am a kind, caring, smart girl, but I make poor choices with social media. As a punishment, I am selling my iPod and will be donating the money to the charity Beat Bullying, in hopes of changing my behavior as well as bringing awareness to Bullying. Because bullying is wrong (Weir).”

When this photo went viral, reactions were varied: some accusing the mother of cyberbullying her daughter to teach her a lesson about cyberbullying, while others claimed, “This makes me happy, because so often people only get caught after it’s far too late to help the victims. Brava, mom. Brava” (AngryCOMMguy). This is a modernized application of branding children with a scarlet letter that is nearly impossible to remove completely and can potentially be seen by one-third of the world population (Biggs).

While audience members of parents using social media can take what they’re viewing with a proverbial grain of salt, children on the receiving end of a public shaming are unlikely to do so. Returning to the principle of other-oriented authenticity and asking if this is something we would do to another adult, blogger Heidi Stone asks how parents would feel about pictures of them wearing a sign declaring their most shameful moments going viral on social media. Would they feel their authentic selves were being expressed if known primarily and forever as “that dad who gambled away his paychecks and made his family homeless” or “that mom who drove drunk with her kids in the car”?

Children deserve to grow into their authentic selves without the omnipresent digital baggage of their poorest choices posted by their parents on social media. For this to occur, parents must balance the use of their children as subject in their online self-presentation with their responsibility to serve as stewards of their children's digital footprint (Kumar and Schoenebeck). Achieving this balance is key to modeling authenticity for our children and respecting our children's individual right to authentic self-authorship.

Conclusion

Self-presentation on social media serves to construct and manage multiple dimensions of parental identity. This identity work can be done both directly and indirectly. Parents' posting about their children on social media is a form of indirect self-presentation, includes both altercasting and humblebragging, and can result in mixed responses from an audience. The scope and permanency of social media disclosure places parents in the position of privacy stewards for their child's digital footprint.

The first step in parenting with integrity online is developing awareness of how the information we as parents disclose about our children can be about our own facework. Once parents achieve this awareness, they can then make choices about future disclosure guided by the practice of self-reflective and other-oriented authenticity. Those choices lay the foundation for their child's digital footprint, providing them the opportunity to develop their own authentic voices.



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Notes

¹ This paper explores “parenting” with integrity; however, the majority of examples that follow are from mothers. The current research on social media usage by parents is overwhelmingly focused on mothers. As our socially constructed definitions of family and fatherhood continue to evolve, a closer look at fathers’ use of social media is also needed.

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