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To Share Or Not To Share: Examining Co-Parenting Relationships And Third-Person Effects In Social Media

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Introduction

School dress-up days, ball games, and evenings out with the family are commonly preserved for posterity on popular social networking sites (SNS). Newsfeeds on Facebook and Instagram in particular are standard platforms for parents eager to share the current events of their children's lives. Since children under the age of 13 are technically not allowed to sign up for accounts on most SNS, including Facebook or Instagram, parents are the ones sharing most photos. While in-the-moment sharing is one main reason for the existence of SNS, those in-the-moment sharing decisions by SNS users do not always include long-term or even outside-of-self consequences. In the case of children, parents have the authority to share visual and text representation of their children's lives without consulting them, and many do. This sharing often also takes place without the knowledge or permission of the child's other parent. However, the consequences of such posting behavior on children and on co-parenting relationships are only recently being explored and rarely discussed in either informal or formal societal contexts.

Parent decision-making is usually based on both personal value structures and in response to societal norms. Such norms help form the basis of third-person effect, the theoretical framework for this study that denotes separation of self from others in judgments about decision-making and opinions. Given the coming of age of the first generation of children documented from birth in the social sharing era, this study addresses the gap in literature regarding parent social sharing via the most common SNS among parents: Facebook. This study includes exploratory questions based on known outcomes of third-person effect to determine parent opinion of Facebook sharing of their children's lives and whether they believe they and online peers are using Facebook in a way that is socially responsible.

Literature Review

Third-person effect

Third-person effect, as explained by Davison (1983), is the theory that, "people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behaviors of others" (p. 3), and "will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than themselves" (p. 3). Davison's initial case study has prompted robust research development in determining variables that influence the strength of perceived third-person effect and variables at the individual versus societal level (Perloff, 1999).

Third-person effect research has been subdivided into several attributes of influence in the theory's breadth: people have been shown to have attitudinal characteristics of third-person effect when consuming all forms of media, including social media (Banning & Sweetser, 2007; Debatin, et. al, 2009), and have been shown to take subsequent action via certain behaviors due to belief in third-person effect possibilities (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009). One study demonstrated a link between perceived media effects on others influencing media behaviors that study participants engaged in and proactive media consumption and engagement choices based on perceived third-person effect efficacy (Sun, Shen, & Pan, 2008).

Davison (1983) notes that censorship is an important variable in third-person effect as issues of morality and ethics tend to play directly into people's value systems, wherein people are far more likely to ascribe higher morals to themselves than the general population.

Third-person effect therefore acts as first-person social barrier, meaning that unsaid norms of what is deemed acceptable are deemed “correct” by a person and used as the basis for judging the standards of others. These perceived norms include parents thinking on behalf of acceptable activities of children: Hoffner and Buchanan (2002) noted such opinions regarding parental opinion of television violence and Gentile (2009) in opinions of adolescent video game use.

Parental Third-Person Perception

Third-person effects have been found to apply to parental perceptions of their own children and other children. Nathanson et al. (2002) found that primary caregivers of children in grades two through eight believed their own children were less impacted or harmed by violent or sexual television content than other children. The researchers reasoned that the caregivers studied considered their children to be extensions of themselves and, in the context of third-person effects, “they may extend their perceptions of personal invulnerability to their offspring” (p. 402). Additionally, Nathanson et al. (2002) found that caregivers who perceived harm to their own or other children from violent or sexual television content were more likely to condone censorship of that content.

Hoffner and Buchanan (2002) also found that parents of children ages 3 to 18 perceived that other children were more affected by violent television content than their own children. Moreover, the researchers found that parents’ perception of harm on their own children decreased as their children aged, but the perception of harm on other children remained the same. “This result is consistent with the view that parents believe their own children become more resistant to media influence as they mature and internalize their parents’ values and standards of conduct. Parents may assume that this is not true for other children, or that other children do not receive appropriate guidance at home, thus remaining susceptible to adverse environmental influences such as televised violence” (p. 244). Hoffner and Buchanan (2002) also found that parents who perceived harm from violent television content to their or other children supported censorship of that content.

Meirick et al. (2009) found a parental third-person perception for materialism presented in television content; the respondents indicated that others’ children were more susceptible to materialism than their own children. However, they found that this perception had no correlation to content censorship. There was also a noted parental first-person perception regarding educational television content. Respondents perceived their own children as learning more about advanced subjects from public television than other children.

Parents on SNS

There is emerging research on parent-child interaction on SNS. Young adults generally accept parent friend requests, though it is partially mitigated by family’s level of openness and trust (Child & Westermann, 2013). Young adults who friend their parents tend to be female and partake in regular family communication patterns to begin with (Ball, Wanzer, & Servoss, 2013). Christofides, Desmarais, and Muise (2010) note that parents and their children disclose personal information at nearly equivalent rates. Additionally, children with parents on Facebook do not have greater perceptions of privacy invasions. In fact, they showed decreased conflict with the parent after the parent joined the site. Enhanced closeness also came from a parent joining Facebook (Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012). In sum, it appears that parents of adult children see relational benefits from the online connection. Further, research suggests that children disclose information at very similar rates to their parents, indicating, perhaps, a shared level of perceived risk (regardless of what that level might actually be). It is possible that the information disclosure levels and level of perceived risk was, in some shape or form, ingrained or taught to the child by the parent. This research offers telling insights into relational patterns online but does not discuss parent posting behaviors of their children.

Kenny (2017) discusses that technology and social media can be beneficial for co-parenting relationships. She mentions that parents are already using social media, and cites that 82 percent of parents under the age of 40 access Facebook several times per day (Kenny, n.d.). Whether parents use social media to effectively co-parent, she says, has yet to be determined.

Research Questions

Currently no existing literature explores co-parenting relationships and their effects on—or effects of—social media activity. In addition to considering the potential long-term effects on their children, are parents cognizant of their child(ren)’s other parent when posting about their children on SNS?

Based on the research reviewed above, and the information missing from current literature regarding this topic, this study sought to examine co-parenting dynamics on social media and possible third-person effects in social media use among individuals involved in co-parenting relationships. The lack of current literature regarding co-parenting relationships, social media and third-person effect prevents hypothesizing about these effects. Therefore, four research questions were posed:

RQ1: What differences exist in social media use between married parents and single parents?

RQ2: What differences exist in social media use between female parents and male parents?

RQ3: What differences exist in social media use between co-parents who are in a relationship with each other and co-parents who are not in a relationship with each other?

RQ4: What is the dynamic between parents and their child(ren) on social media?

Method

To gauge parent opinions about SNS sharing, third-person effect, parent values about perceived privacy of their own children and others, and parent actions on SNS in relation to their child(ren)'s other parent, a survey was created based around the research questions. The survey was distributed via three methods: 1) the researchers posted the survey link to their own Facebook pages 2) the survey link was sent via Twitter 3) the survey link was posted to Amazon's Mechanical Turk system to ensure a broad population of respondents beyond convenience sampling. The samples were not separated for the purposes of this study but were used as one sample, with a total of 499 respondents. Of the 499 respondents, 149 were convenience respondents and 350 were from Mechanical Turk.

Amazon's Mechanical Turk is an online labor market in which employers post computer-based tasks and hire workers to complete these tasks. The workers, or "MTurkers" as they are called, select among a variety of online tasks and receive payment for completion of their work. In recent years, MTurkers have become a resource for social science researchers (Berinsky, Huber & Lenz, 2012; Mason & Suri, 2011).

MTurkers typically perform tasks that last less than 15 minutes, so this survey matched a typical time commitment. MTurkers have been shown to be significantly more diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, and social class than many convenience samples, particularly college students (Buhrmester et al., 2011); this helped our survey in that parents from a broad spectrum of backgrounds would enrich the data. While MTurkers are not necessarily representative of the populations from which they are drawn (Berinsky et al., 2012), they can be similar to Internet-based populations (Buhrmester et al., 2011), which help in Internet-based studies such as for SNS. MTurkers tend to be more frequent Facebook users, but also have a more skeptical outlook on life than some other populations (Farquhar & Davidson, 2015). Considered holistically, the MTurk option was appropriate for the scope and hypotheses of this study.

The 61-question survey was created in a university-based online survey site. The survey was written and edited by the research team and included an informed consent form with opt-out option at the beginning of the survey for Institutional Review Board compliance. There was also a question at the beginning of the survey asking if participants were parents. If the participant was not a parent, the survey concluded. The final survey was sent in two phases: Twitter and Facebook convenience sample in December 2016, and MTurk sample in January 2017. The survey was not altered in any way between phases.

After data cleaning for completed surveys and a "human assurance" question that was a simple math problem to ensure mental acuity, the final data total was 499 survey responses. Demographic questions including gender, age, and number of children were then followed by a Facebook usage scale and Facebook opinion scale, based on prior Facebook surveys gauging Facebook familiarity (Farquhar & Davidson, 2015). The third section of the survey were five-point Likert scale questions gauging opinions on third-person effect as it pertained to parental oversight of SNS usage and Facebook usage.

The researchers reviewed the responses manually and after importing into survey analysis software to run statistics. Outliers or presumed invalid responses on frequency reports were looked at individually to ensure participant acuity.

Results

A total of 499 respondents participated in the study by answering the questionnaire. Twelve participants did not provide any demographic information. Out of those who provided demographic information (N=487), 37.2 percent (N=181) were male and 62.8 percent (N=306) were female.

The average age of the participants was 37.5 years ($SD=10.46$), with 44.4 percent ($N=216$) being between the ages of 18 and 34, 42.3 percent ($N=206$) being 35-49 years old, and 13.3% ($N=65$) being 50 years old or older. U.S. citizens made up 98.8 percent of the sample ($N=481$). A majority of the participants (64%, $N=312$) indicated they are married, while 36 percent ($N=175$) indicated they are not married. Most participants (56%, $N=280$) specified they are in a relationship with their child(ren)’s other parent, with 12 percent ($N=58$) specifying they are not in a relationship with their child(ren)’s other parent. Thirty-two percent ($N=161$) did not specify the nature of their relationship with their child’s other parent. Of those who specified they had children younger than 18 (71%, $N=344$), 45 percent ($N=154$) had one child under 18, 38% ($N=131$) had two children under 18, 13 percent ($N=43$) had three children under 18, 4 percent ($N=13$) had four children, and only 3 respondents had more than four children younger than 18.

In self-assessing their activity levels on Facebook, 44 percent ($N=209$) indicated they post status updates at least daily, with 53 percent ($N=255$) indicating they post status updates a few times a month or a few times a year. Only 3 percent ($N=15$) responded that they never post status updates on Facebook. A majority (55%, $N=264$) specified that they “very frequently” or “somewhat frequently” comment on Facebook, while 39 percent ($N=188$) indicated that they share links “very frequently” or “somewhat frequently”. Most access Facebook from a desktop or laptop computer (79%, $N=396$) and/or a smartphone (74%, $N=368$). A majority (61%, $N=294$) access Facebook for more than one hour every day.

To examine third-person effects, the participants’ responses to questions about the effects of social media use on their children were summed into one “third-person effect—own” variable, and responses to questions about the effects on others’ children were summed into one “third-person effect—others” variable. The questions used to create these variables are presented in [table 1](#). In order to examine the difference between perceived actions and effects of Facebook activity on self and those perceived about others, “own” scores were aggregated and averaged and “other” scores were aggregated and averaged. A third-person differential score was created by subtracting the “own” score from the “other.” The differential score reflected the difference between the Facebook effects respondents perceived about others and the effects to themselves, and follows a method that has been previously used in literature examining third-person effects and social media (Debatin et al., 2009).

Table 1

Third-person effect—own	Third-person effect—others
Do you think that you have put your privacy at risk by things you have shared on Facebook?	Do you think that some of your Facebook friends put their privacy at risk by what they share on Facebook?
Do you worry that your children will be upset when they are older by some of the things you've posted about them online?	Do you think that your Facebook friend's children will be upset when they are older by some of the things their parents have posted about them online?
Do you think your child(ren) share your values about the appropriate use of social media?	Do you think other people's children share their parent(s) values about appropriate use of social media?
Do you think your child(ren) worry about their popularity when using social media?	Do you think other people's children worry about their popularity when using social media?

Research Question 1

RQ1 asked, “What differences exist in social media use between married and single parents?” To answer this question, we looked at the differences in self-reported Facebook activity, co-parenting behaviors on Facebook, and possible third-person effects in social media use. A majority of the participants (64%, $N=312$) indicated they are married, while 36 percent ($N=175$) indicated they are not married.

Of those who are married, 127 (40.7%) indicated that they post status updates on Facebook at least once daily, 111 (35.5%) indicated they share links somewhat or very frequently, and 166 (53.2%) said they comment on others’ post on Facebook at least once daily.

Twenty-nine percent (N=90) said they post pictures of their children at least once per week, while 146 (46.8%) indicated they post pictures of their children about once per month, and 23 (7.3%) said they never post pictures of their children. Thirty-two (10.3%) access Facebook for more than three hours each day, while 43 (13.8%) access it for 2-3 hours, 113 (36.2%) access it for 1-2 hours, 100 (32%) access it for less than one hour, and 15 (4.9%) do not access Facebook every day. In the married group, 173 (55.4%) indicated their posts are private, 21 (16.6%) said their posts are public, and 75 (24%) indicated that some of their posts are private and some are public.

In the group of single parents, 83 (47.4%) indicated they post status updates at least once daily, 75 (42.8%) indicated they share links somewhat or very frequently, and 94 (53.7%) said they commented on others' posts at least once daily. Sixteen percent (N=28) said they post pictures of their children at least once per week, while 44 (25%) indicated they post pictures of their children about once per month, and 8 (4.5%) said they never post pictures of their children. Ten (5.7%) access Facebook for more than three hours each day, while 31 (17.7%) access it for 2-3 hours, 64 (36.5%) access it for 1-2 hours, 59 (33.7%) access it for less than one hour, and 10 (5.7%) do not access Facebook every day. Eighty-one (46.2%) indicated their posts are private, 51 (29.1%) said their posts are public, and 39 (22.2%) indicated that some of their posts are private and some are public.

In looking at married respondents' self-reported co-parenting behaviors on Facebook, 89 (28.5%) sometimes or always ask permission of their child(ren)'s other parent before posting photos of them on Facebook, while 144 (46.1%) never ask permission. Sixty-one (19.65%) indicated their child(ren)'s other parent sometimes or always asks their permission before posting photos on Facebook, while 144 (46.1%) said their child(ren)'s other parent never asks their permission.

In looking at single parent respondents' self-reported co-parenting behaviors on Facebook, 21 (12%) sometimes or always ask permission of their child(ren)'s other parent before posting photos of them on Facebook, while 43 (24.5%) never ask permission. Eighteen (10.2%) indicated their child(ren)'s other parent sometimes or always asks their permission before posting photos on Facebook, while 44 (25.1%) said their child(ren)'s other parent never asks their permission.

A Chi-square test for independence indicated an association between marital status and respondents' frequency of posting pictures of their children, $\chi^2(6, n=342) = 12.82, p=.04, \phi=.194$.

A Chi-square test for independence also indicated an association between marital status and the nature of the respondents' posts (public vs. private), $\chi^2(4, n=342) = 10.21, p=.037, \phi=.037$.

Additionally, an independent samples t-test was run to compare the third-person differential score between these two groups. There was a significant difference in scores for married parents ($M=-.60, SD=.60$) and single parents ($M=-.44, SD=.59; t(290)=1.968, p=.05$, two-tailed).

Research Question 2

RQ2 asked, "What differences exist in social media use between female parents and male parents?" To answer this question, we looked at the differences in self-reported Facebook activity, co-parenting behaviors on Facebook, and possible third-person effects in social media use. Of the participants who responded to the set of questions asking about Facebook activity (N=482), 304 (63%) were female, and 178 (37%) were male. Of the participants who responded to the set of questions asking about co-parenting behaviors (N=336), 225 (67%) were female, and 111 (33%) were male.

Sixty percent (N=136) of the females indicated that they post status updates on Facebook at least once daily, and 121 (53.7%) indicated they share links somewhat or very frequently. Out of respondents in this group, 178 (79.1%) said they comment on others' post on Facebook at least once daily, while 98 (43.6%) sometimes comment and 28 (12.4%) rarely or never comment on others' posts. Ninety-five (42.2%) said they post pictures of their children at least once per week, while 117 (52%) indicated they post pictures of their children about once per month, and 17 (7.5%) said they never post pictures of their children. Twenty-nine (12.8%) access Facebook for more than three hours each day, while 46 (20.4%) access it for 2-3 hours, 124 (55.1%) access it for 1-2 hours, 92 (40.8%) access it for less than one hour, and 13 (5.7%) do not access Facebook every day. Of the female participants, 186 (82.6%) indicated their posts are private, 38 (16.8%) said their posts are public, and 76 (33.8%) indicated that some of their posts are private and some are public.

Sixty-eight percent (N=76) of the males indicated they post status updates at least once daily, and 67 (60.4%) indicated they share links somewhat or very frequently. Out of respondents in this group, 86 (77.4%) said they commented on others' posts at least once daily, while 60 (54%) sometimes comment and 32 (28.8%) said they rarely or never comment on others' posts. Twenty-six (23.4%) said they post pictures of their children at least once per week, while 73 (65.8%) indicated they post pictures of their children about once per month, and 14 (12.6%) said they never post pictures of their children. Fourteen (12.6%) access Facebook for more than three hours each day, while 28 (12.4%) access it for 2-3 hours, 53 (47.7%) access it for 1-2 hours, 71 (63.9%) access it for less than one hour, and 12 (10.8%) do not access Facebook every day. Seventy-one (63.9%) indicated their posts are private, 66 (59.5%) said their posts are public, and 39 (35.1%) indicated that some of their posts are private and some are public.

In looking at female respondents' self-reported co-parenting behaviors on Facebook, 67 (29.8%) sometimes or always ask permission of their child(ren)'s other parent before posting photos of them on Facebook, while 133 (59.1%) never ask permission. Sixty-three percent (N=141) said the other parent of their child(ren) sometimes or frequently posts status updates or photos of their children, while 75 (33.3%) said the other parent of their child(ren) never post about their children. Forty-seven (20.9%) indicated their child(ren)'s other parent sometimes or always asks their permission before posting photos on Facebook, while 122 (54.2%) said their child(ren)'s other parent never asks their permission.

In looking at male respondents' self-reported co-parenting behaviors on Facebook, 43 (38.7%) sometimes or always ask permission of their child(ren)'s other parent before posting photos of them on Facebook, while 57 (51.4%) never ask permission. Eighty-four percent (N=93) said the other parent of their child(ren) sometimes or frequently posts status updates or photos of their children, while 15 (13.5%) said the other parent of their child(ren) never post about their children. Thirty-two (28.8%) indicated their child(ren)'s other parent sometimes or always asks their permission before posting photos on Facebook, while 69 (62.2%) said their child(ren)'s other parent never asks their permission.

A Chi-square test for independence indicated an association between gender and frequency of commenting on others' posts, $\chi^2(4, n=482) = 9.651, p=.047, \phi=.142$.

A Chi-square test for independence also indicated an association between gender and respondents' frequency of posting pictures of their children on Facebook, $\chi^2(3, n=342) = 11.85, p=.008, \phi=.186$.

A Chi-square test for independence also indicated an association between gender and the nature of the respondents' posts (public vs. private), $\chi^2(2, n=476) = 41.41, p=.000, \phi=.295$.

A Chi-square test for independence also indicated an association between gender and frequency of the other parent of the respondents' child(ren) posting pictures or status updates about the child(ren), $\chi^2(3, n=336) = 38.973, p=.000, \phi=.341$.

A Chi-square test for independence also indicated an association between gender and frequency of the other parent of the respondents' child(ren) asking permission before posting pictures or status updates about the child(ren), $\chi^2(4, n=336) = 13.571, p=.009, \phi=.201$.

Additionally, an independent samples t-test was run to compare the third-person differential score between these two groups. There was a significant difference in scores for females ($M=-.6495, SD=.63$) and males ($M=-.39, SD=.53; t(293)=3.389, p=.001$, two-tailed).

Research Question 3

RQ3 asked, "What differences exist in social media use between co-parents who are in a relationship with each other and co-parents who are not in a relationship with each other?" To answer this question, we looked at the differences in these two groups in self-reported Facebook activity, co-parenting behaviors on Facebook, and possible third-person effects in social media use. Most participants (56%, N=280) specified they are in a relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent, with 12% (N=58) specifying they are not in a relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent. Thirty-two percent (N=161) did not specify the nature of their relationship with their child's other parent.

Of those who indicated they are in a relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent (N=280), 119 (42.5%) indicated that they post status updates on Facebook at least once daily, 102 (36.4%) indicated they share links somewhat or very frequently, and 154 (55%) said they comment on others' post on Facebook at least once daily. One hundred (35.7%) said they post pictures of their children at least once per week, while 154 (55%) indicated they post pictures of their children about once per month, and 24 (8.6%) said they never post pictures of their children.

Thirty (10.7%) access Facebook for more than three hours each day, while 45 (16.1%) access it for 2-3 hours, 107 (38.2%) access it for 1-2 hours, 87 (31.1%) access it for less than one hour, and 11 (3.9%) do not access Facebook every day. Of the participants in a relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent, 166 (60.1%) indicated their posts are private, 48 (17.4%) said their posts are public, and 62 (22.5%) indicated that some of their posts are private and some are public.

Of those who indicated they are not in a relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent (N=58), 31 (53.4%) indicated they post status updates at least once daily, 30 (51.7%) indicated they share links somewhat or very frequently, and 39 (67.2%) said they commented on others' posts at least once daily. Nineteen (32.8%) said they post pictures of their children at least once per week, while 33 (56.9%) indicated they post pictures of their children about once per month, and 6 (10.3%) said they never post pictures of their children. Six (10.3%) access Facebook for more than three hours each day, while 10 (17.2%) access it for 2-3 hours, 23 (39.7%) access it for 1-2 hours, and 19 (32.8%) access it for less than one hour. Thirty-three (56.9%) indicated their posts are private, 16 (27.6%) said their posts are public, and 9 (15.5%) indicated that some of their posts are private and some are public.

In looking at self-reported co-parenting behaviors on Facebook of participants in a relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent, 98 (35.9%) sometimes or always ask permission of their child(ren)'s other parent before posting photos of them on Facebook, while 155 (56.8%) never ask permission. Seventy percent (N=197) said the other parent of their child(ren) sometimes or frequently posts status updates or photos of their children, while 73 (26.7%) said the other parent of their child(ren) never post about their children. Seventy-one (25.4%) indicated their child(ren)'s other parent sometimes or always asks their permission before posting photos on Facebook, while 154 (56.4%) said their child(ren)'s other parent never asks their permission.

In looking at self-reported co-parenting behaviors on Facebook of participants who are not in a relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent, 11 (19.3%) sometimes or always ask permission of their child(ren)'s other parent before posting photos of them on Facebook, while 34 (59.6%) never ask permission. Fifty-nine percent (N=34) said the other parent of their child(ren) sometimes or frequently posts status updates or photos of their children, while 16 (28.1%) said the other parent of their child(ren) never post about their children. Seven (12.3%) indicated their child(ren)'s other parent sometimes or always asks their permission before posting photos on Facebook, while 36 (63.2%) said their child(ren)'s other parent never asks their permission.

A Chi-square test for independence indicated an association between co-parent relationship status and frequency of the respondents asking permission of the other parent of their child(ren) before posting pictures or status updates about the child(ren), $\chi^2(5, n=330) = 27.481, p=.000, phi=.289$.

A Chi-square test for independence also indicated an association between co-parent relationship status and frequency that the other parent of the respondents' child(ren) post pictures of their children on Facebook, $\chi^2(3, n=330) = 20.563, p=.000, phi=.250$.

A Chi-square test for independence also indicated an association between co-parent relationship status and frequency of the other parent of the respondents' child(ren) asking permission before posting pictures or status updates about the child(ren), $\chi^2(4, n=330) = 33.596, p=.000, phi=.319$.

Additionally, an independent samples t-test was run to compare the third-person differential score between these two groups. There was no significant difference in scores between those in a relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent and those not in a relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent.

Research Question 4

RQ4 asked, "What is the dynamic between parents and their child(ren) on social media?" To answer this question, we asked the participants to respond to a series of questions about their child(ren)'s social media activity and their own social media activity in regards to their child(ren).

Less than a quarter of the sample (23.8%, N=119) indicated that any of their children have their own social media accounts, and 27.7% (N=138) mentioned their child(ren) did not ask permission before opening a social media account. A strong majority of those who answered the question (91%, N=154) indicated that they monitor their child(ren)'s social media activity. Fifty-three (16.3%) said their child(ren) probably or definitely engage in social media activity that they are not aware of, while 230 (70.5%) said their child(ren) probably or definitely do not engage in social media activity that they are not aware of.

Most (N=195, 64.4%) said their child(ren) are aware when they post status updates and/or photos about them on Facebook, while 71 (23.4%) said their child(ren) probably or definitely are not aware. A large majority (N=301, 70.5%) are not worried their child(ren) will be upset when they are older by some of the things they have posted about them online, even though 173 (53.9%) admitted that their child(ren) definitely, probably or maybe will edit their online presence when they are adults based on the things the respondents have posted about them.

Discussion

This study sought to jump start a discussion on social media's impact on co-parenting relationships and the existence of third-person effects of social media in co-parenting relationships. Many parents regularly post on SNS, but this study shows that few parents consider their child(ren)'s other parent when choosing what and how often to share on SNS.

Results for RQ1 found a statistically significant relationship between parents' marital status and the frequency that they post pictures of their children. The biggest difference can be found in the "very frequently" category, where 13% of the married respondents indicated they post pictures of their children more than once per week, and only 3.8% of the single parents said they post more than once per week. A statistically significant relationship was also found between the nature of the respondents' posts and their marital status. A larger percentage of married parents make their posts private (57.7% for married vs. 47.4% for single), while a larger percentage of single parents allow their posts to be public (29.8% for single vs. 17.3% for married). There was also a statistically significant result in looking at third-person effects in married parents vs. single parents. Married parents had a larger differential between their "third-person—other" and "third-person—own" variables, indicating single parents are more likely to perceive social media sharing as affecting others more than themselves.

These results indicate that the difference between married and single parents in their social media use includes the fact that the married parents in this study post more pictures of their children than single parents, but are more likely to have their posts private. Further, third-person effects in social media use are greater for single parents than married parents.

Results for RQ2 found statistically significant relationships between gender and the frequency of commenting, frequency of posting pictures, nature of posts, frequency of child(ren)'s other parent posting about the children, and frequency of the child(ren)'s other parent asking permission before posting. The data indicate that females are commenting on others' posts and posting pictures of their children more often than males, and are more likely to have their posts private. The males in this sample, however, are more likely to have their posts public (37.5% of males vs. 12.7% of females), and to ask permission of their child(ren)'s other parent before posting. A larger percentage of females (20.9%) than males (9%) reported that their child(ren)'s other parent does not post about their children. There was also a statistically significant result in looking at third-person effects in male parents vs. female parents. Female parents had a larger differential between their "third-person—other" and "third-person—own" variables, indicating male parents are more likely to perceive social media sharing as affecting others more than themselves.

These results indicate that the difference between male parents and female parents includes the fact that females are more active on Facebook and are more likely to protect what they share by keeping the post private. Males are less active, more likely to post publicly, but also more likely to ask permission from their co-parents before posting. Further, third-person effects in social media use are greater for male parents than female parents.

Results for RQ3 found statistically significant relationships between whether the parent was in a romantic relationship with their co-parent and frequency of asking permission from the co-parent before posting about the children, frequency that the co-parent posts about the children, and frequency of getting permission from the co-parent before he or she posts about the children. The data suggest those in a relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent are more likely to ask permission from their co-parent before posting about the children, are more likely to have their co-parent post about the children, and are more likely to have their co-parent ask their permission before posting about the children. There was also a statistically significant result in looking at third-person effects in individuals in a relationship with their co-parents vs. individuals not in a relationship with their co-parent.

Those in a relationship with their co-parents had a larger differential between their “third-person—other” and “third-person—own” variables, indicating those not in a relationship with their co-parents are more likely to perceive social media sharing as affecting others more than themselves.

These results indicate that the difference between individuals in a relationship with their co-parent and those not in a relationship with their co-parent includes the fact that those in a relationship are more likely to ask permission of, and be asked permission from, their co-parent before posting about their children, and are more likely to have their co-parent also post about their children. Further, third-person effects in social media use are greater for those not in a romantic relationship with their co-parent than those who are.

Results for RQ4 were exploratory and did not include any statistical tests. However, these results indicate that the parent-child dynamic on social media use includes the fact that most parents are monitoring their children’s activity on Facebook, but many admit their children are still probably engaging in activity on Facebook that they are not aware of. Almost a quarter of the sample said their children don’t know when they post about them. Almost three-quarters are not worried that their children will one day be upset about what they post on social media, even though half indicated some sureness that their children will one day edit their online presence because of what’s being posted about them.

Limitations & Directions for Future Research

The current study has a number of strengths, particularly co-parenting social media behaviors and values, and third-person effects in parents on social media. However, there are a number of areas where further research is warranted.

The sample of participants was 62.8 percent female and nearly 99 percent were U.S. citizens. Getting a more balanced representation would serve for clearer points of comparison and stronger generalizability. It is likely that participants of other cultures would show differences from the sample used in the present study. Also, the sample was collected through both snowball sampling on social media as well as through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk system. Both sampling methods have limitations, and future research should continue to move toward sampling methods that increase external validity. Future research should include more demographic measures to further identify points of distinction between MTurkers and participants recruited through more traditional methods.

As the literature continues to grow, future research should move toward hypotheses and stronger, predictive analyses. The current study focused on lower levels of analysis largely because of the lack of literature on the topic.

This study provides evidence of a relationship between social media activity and co-parenting habits, as well as the existence of third-person effects of social media in different types of parents. There are differences in how different types of parents participate in social media platforms, including how much they consider or include their co-parent in their social media activity decision making, but further research is necessary to fully flesh out these relationships and differences. This study serves as proof that this important topic area has much knowledge to be obtained.

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