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Social media and performative parenting

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1. Social media and performative parenting

Sun Sun Lim and Yang Wang

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become the de facto ‘water cooler’ for a vast swathe of internet users. Connecting people across geographical areas and time zones, platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, WeChat, Facebook and Twitter provide lively venues for people to connect with others who share common needs, interests and goals. Parents are no exception. With the intensifying use of social media in many realms of everyday life, even parenting is manifesting a decidedly public dimension. Whereas one might understandably assume that parenting is a private activity undertaken within the home, the use of social media to highlight the joys and trials of raising kids has put parenting under the digital spotlight.

Increasingly, parents are keen to showcase their children’s growth and development to family and friends through posts on Facebook, photos on Instagram, and videos over WeChat, WhatsApp and TikTok. Significant achievements earn praise and social endorsement, as well as commendations for excellent parenting. At the same time, the sharing of parenting struggles over social media also elicits expressions of commiseration, sympathy and support. The ensuing virtuous cycles of mutual affirmation and validation can create a sense of community, but the competitiveness and envy that could also result may be alienating. The tensions in such social media dynamics that are rooted in performative parenting in our hyper-connected era thus warrant greater scrutiny.

Lying at the intersections of communication, sociology, social psychology, and science and technology studies (STS), we discuss issues associated with performative parenting through an interdisciplinary framework and draw upon fieldwork conducted with families in China’s urban areas.

TRENDS AND MOTIVATIONS IN PERFORMATIVE PARENTING

As technology evolves and assumes growing salience in society, parenting has been both technologically mediated and technologically intensified. Naturally, the parenting remit is sizeable and goes far beyond coordinating schedules, ensuring familial wellbeing and maintaining relationships. Technology is indeed also an invaluable resource for parents in terms of the information they need and the opportunities they seek. A large body of research has thus focused on how parents, especially mothers rather than fathers, appropriate various technological platforms to solicit support and

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exchange parenting experiences to cope with the tribulations of parenthood. Many such interactions take on a public dimension where people interact with both known and unknown publics, for whom parents engage in some form of performativity, as if under the spotlight of the 'front stage' (Goffman, 1969).

Since the 1990s, mothers have found solace and solidarity on parenting websites and online discussion forums, and more recently parenting blogs and social media, with such online resources complementing the advice of healthcare professionals or trusted family members (Lupton et al., 2016). Notably, online support groups are a potentially valuable resource for new mothers to navigate cultural limitations surrounding more intimate issues such as breastfeeding (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019), encouraging experience sharing (Hall & Irvine, 2009), offering increased social connections and improving understanding of parenting responsibilities (Brady & Guerin, 2010). These varied online exchanges play critical roles in mitigating depression and enhancing self-esteem, especially among postnatal or young mothers adapting to their new duties and identities (Bragadóttir, 2008).

Similarly, Wilson and Yochim's (2017) study of working- and middle-class stay-at-home mothers in the US found that these women draw heavily upon online resources such as parenting websites, 'mommy blogs' and online communities on Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest for material and emotional support. More recently, there has been a proliferation of pregnancy apps that are connected to wearable devices to facilitate the tracking of conception, foetal growth, heart rate and movements and biometrics, even including taking and sharing photographs of baby bumps (Godwin, 2019). Publicness, performativity and peer support thus go hand in hand and indeed are deeply intertwined in present-day parenting.

Performative parenting may also extend from more instrumental communication, specifically home–school conferencing – referring to parents' communications with teachers that serve to bridge the gap between home and school, such as interacting with teachers via telephone, e-mail or attending parent–teacher meetings (Stright & Yeo, 2014). Such practices have been found to positively influence children's academic performance because they motivate children and offer them a sense of security, while giving parents a closer understanding of their children's educational pursuits and encouraging parental support (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Home-school conferencing via mobile apps is a growing trend that rides on the convenience of digital platforms to facilitate greater communication between parents and teachers. Such apps may push automated messages on routine matters such as homework requirements and deadlines. As well, these apps typically come with private messaging functions where parents and teachers can engage in discussions over specific matters such as more personalized feedback on individual children's learning achievements or difficulties. It is in the latter context that performative parenting can also occur as parents may wish to impress upon teachers their efforts in assisting their children's learning, expressions of support for teachers' efforts, and so on. As we will elaborate on later, this is a salient trend among urban Chinese parents. Strikingly too, besides custom home–school conferencing apps, parents and teachers are increasingly using generic messaging apps and social media

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platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and WeChat for their interactions (Lim, 2020).

CHINESE PARENTS AND PERFORMATIVE PARENTING

With China becoming a global AI (artificial intelligence) superpower (Lee, 2018), birthing many technological innovations that have taken the world by storm, it is little wonder that the Chinese are embracing technology in virtually every realm of their everyday lives, including parenting.

Chinese parents regard 'training' their children to subscribe to the right values as key to their positive development (Chao, 1995; Chen & Luster, 2002). Correspondingly, if parents fail to offer effective 'family education' and their children misbehave, parents can be taken to task and criticized for their negligence and indulgence (Kelley & Tseng, 1992). Besides good behaviour, Chinese society has long valorized academic achievement in children (Chao, 1995; Chao & Tseng, 2005). Indeed, contemporary Chinese families have never been more deeply invested in their children's academic endeavours (Lim, 2021) and, therefore, the use of technological applications in education, be it for facilitating, managing, monitoring and boosting children's educational performance, is hardly surprising.

In our research with Chinese parents over the past five years, we have observed increasingly intensive use of mobile apps for education and communication purposes among parents of different socioeconomic brackets. China's technocentric environment encourages unprecedented parental participation in children's school lives and enables extensive and continuous parent–teacher and parent–parent connections. These trends have engendered an interactive and relational culture of parental involvement in children's education. In such a climate, parenting practices that traditionally occurred in private spaces, such as supervising homework, contacting teachers and registering for school activities, have now been brought from 'back stage' to 'front stage' (Goffman, 1969).

We unpack how these previously prosaic activities now necessitate parents' careful and deliberate performance under the gaze of teachers, other parents and children, as well as online networks of weak ties. For contemporary Chinese parents, one important venue for performative parenting is parent–teacher conferencing and class management apps such as *DingTalk* (钉钉), *Yiqixue* (一起学), and *Banji youhua dashi* (班级优化大师). These educational platforms provide a wide range of education-related functions, including children's curriculum schedules, homework management tools, notifications, online courses, parent–teacher communication channels and shared drives for uploading learning resources. They are widely utilized by most primary and secondary school teachers as well as parents in urban China. Intensive use of these apps facilitates efficient, real-time teacher–parent interactions in which teachers provide feedback on children's academic performance at school and disseminate instructions for parental assistance on a daily basis. Parents, in turn,

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have to respond to these requests while keeping on top of their children's educational progress and outcomes.

While the convenience of real-time parent–school connections enables parents to be actively involved in their children's education, it also escalates parenting responsibilities. The pervasiveness of these educational and communication technologies has extended the criteria for 'good parenting' to include the ability to respond promptly and ably to any request from the school or teachers, be it to upload overdue homework, confirm receipt of notifications or participate in polls. Since the majority of these parenting behaviours are now visible to teachers and other parents, positive responses and active participation help parents leave a 'perfect' impression on all these audiences. Conversely, however, parents' failure to deliver on those tasks will invite disapproval from teachers and other parents and even disadvantage their children at school (as many parents fear). Over time, performativity has become an essential parenting skill and part and parcel of everyday life for these digitally connected parents. As described by a Chinese mother in our research, parenting is 'another full-time job, with endless overtime and the obligation to please everyone except ourselves'.

Besides those formal modes of parent–teacher communication via official school apps, performative parenting is also widely witnessed in day-to-day, casual chats over popular social media platforms such as WeChat, QQ, Weibo, *Xiaohongshu* (小红书), and so on. Parent chat groups on WeChat and QQ are the most common venues for daily parent–teacher and parent–parent chats in China. In these chat groups, teachers usually take on the role of administrators who disseminate education-related information, including school notifications, homework instructions and reports of students' academic performance. They also set and uphold norms of civilized interaction within the chat and answer parents' questions. Parents, who engage in group chats with varying degrees of diligence, are expected to support teachers' educational efforts and provide mutual assistance to other parents by responding to requests, sharing useful information, proposing solutions to others' problems, and so on. These chat groups thus serve a dual purpose. They allow parents to keep abreast of their children's school lives on a daily or even hourly basis and help them build and strengthen relationships with teachers and other parents.

In these interactive parent groups, careful self-presentation and strategic performativity are therefore tacit requirements for every parent, be they openly enthusiastic or grudgingly compliant. Specifically, parents must be prepared to invest considerable attention in all ongoing chats and be unfailingly responsive to all manner of requests. Etiquette-wise, one must express gratitude with words such as 'thank you', 'noted with thanks', 'received', and so on. Parents also have to be cautious about their words and actions in daily chats, including what (not) to say, when (not) to say, to whom (and not), as well as the use of appropriate words, tones and emojis in different contexts. They must frequently engage in 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1983), where they have to conceal their authentic feelings to maintain a genial, polite and ebullient image in the presence of teachers and other parents. For example, our findings revealed that when parents disagree with each other or take offence during

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mediated conversations, most of them choose to cloak their negative emotions and forge compromises to avoid direct conflict for fear of sullying their well-cultivated image and adversely affecting their children.

Performative parenting in these parent groups also gives rise to competitiveness and peer pressure. In particular, many parents profess a great desire to become ‘opinion leaders’ in parent groups through actively participating in discussions and frequently sharing useful information, as well as providing practical and emotional support to fellow members. However, these ostensibly well-intentioned efforts often belie an implicit contest to gain more attention and respect from the teachers and other parents over time. This invisible yet palpable rivalry renders these parents susceptible to unforgiving peer standards and aggravates parental anxiety about ‘not doing well enough compared to other parents’.

Similarly, another popular channel for casual parent–teacher and parent–parent connections is through daily posts, comments and likes on social media platforms. Many Chinese parents have the habit of sharing parenting experiences on Moments (a social media platform attached to WeChat) using a combination of text posts, photos and videos, with content about mundane titbits such as children’s school and extracurricular activities, new dishes they prepare for their children, family vacation photos, and the like. Aside from personal parenting experiences, parents also share useful information and interesting stories about children, education and parenting that they come across online. These sharing practices are highly interactive since both parents and teachers are active in liking and commenting on these posts, allowing parents to establish and strengthen their relationships via such ancillary yet continual interactions.

In this highly interactive and densely networked environment, while Chinese parents may benefit from more extensive and diverse connections, they also face the perpetual stress of appropriate self-presentation and strategic image management in a state of constant publicness. Since posts on social media are publicly visible to large networks of teachers and parents, as well as other acquaintances and even strangers, they usually feel obliged to share high-quality, carefully curated content that presents a positive, well-groomed and competent image to these audiences. For instance, before sharing photos on social media, many parents spend a lot of time selecting the best-looking photos and embellishing them with editing software. In a similar vein, parents are also careful to avoid potentially controversial topics and disclosure of overly negative emotions in social media posts.

Performative parenting online becomes even more complicated when a parent simultaneously juggles multiple social media platforms. Specifically, they have to develop sharpened awareness of different audiences, preferred topics, and norms of interaction on different platforms, and tactically adjust their online activity to project their best selves (Wang & Lim, 2021). For example, on their own Moments page, parents freely share frivolous and useless personal experiences or have casual conversations with friends using hilarious emojis, jokes and in-group code words. In contrast, in parent chat groups that are typically created for essential teacher–parent communication instead of small talk, parents tend to be more serious and refrain from

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inundating group members with irrelevant personal issues. Parents may experience 'context collapse' (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) when they fail to share the 'right' content on the 'right' platform, which could undermine their reputation in certain contexts and even result in misunderstanding and conflicts.

For Chinese parents, therefore, performative parenting over social media is driven by both the symbolic value of gaining recognition and pragmatic purposes of relationship building and information acquisition with teachers and other parents (see also Marwick & boyd, 2010; Turkle, 2011; Vitak et al., 2015). Above all, undergirding these online communities of teachers and parents are inherent rules of reciprocity, mutual support and quid pro quos (Wang & Lim, 2021).

WHITHER THE DOWNSIDES OF PERFORMATIVE PARENTING

For all of its virtues, technologically mediated performative parenting has significant downsides. The active mobilization of home–school conferencing apps and parent–parent and parent–teacher chat groups underlines how vital these services are for parents who wish to be actively engaged in their children's school lives. Our findings reveal that parents labour under an ever-multiplying variety of channels to communicate with their children's teachers and other parents, compounding their sense of burden. Parents have to diligently manage relentless notifications from these apps and chat groups to keep their children on track in school. Some also lamented that with peer comparisons and peer pressure being galvanized in these public platforms, educational hurdles seem ever more daunting. Social media allows parents to know what other parents are doing on an unprecedented scale. Not only do these parents experience peer pressure from their immediate networks of families and friends or children's classmates' parents, but they are also inundated with perspectives on 'good parenting' from all over the world. Furthermore, with other parents openly flaunting their children's achievements on these platforms and currying favour with teachers to earn preferential treatment, the digitally connected parent must increasingly engage in 'emotion work'.

These public platforms and the interactions they host, little by little, shift the norms around 'ideal parenting'. Just as mothers who interact online via discussion forums and blogs can influence how 'good parenting' is defined (see, for example, Friedman, 2010; Geinger et al., 2014), the mobile-enabled child–parent, parent–parent and parent–teacher communication also helps to set the benchmarks for 'ideal parenting'. Indeed, our findings reveal a kind of 'viral panic' among parents – that they constantly compare their own efforts against those of other parents, evaluate their investment in their children's education, and feel guilty and anxious when they hear about other parents who are doing more or 'better'. And yet, however trying such online interactions are, parents hardly feel ready or willing to extricate themselves from these relational networks because they would be denying themselves vital information and resources that can help their children get ahead in the educational rat

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race. Therefore, despite the additional psychological burden, parents resolutely bear this weight of exacting parenting norms for the sake of their children.

CONCLUSION

Parenting in the digital age is replete with both opportunities and challenges – the latter being especially acute in some societies. As we have elaborated earlier, the intensifying use of social media shifts parenting experiences from the private realm into the public spotlight and allows parents to know (with often vivid clarity) what other parents are doing worldwide. During this process, parents' self-perceptions also take on a public dimension and become shaped by the publicness of their own parenting behaviours online. Instead of parenting out of instinct, personal preference and daily trial and error, they choose to accord with 'universally recognized templates' for 'good parenting' for the sake of earning praise, validation and peer support. They also tend to evaluate their success as parents from the viewpoint of spectators, based on 'what others say about me' and 'what impressions I leave on others' rather than simply 'what I have done for my child'. Indeed, our findings show that many parents often feel guilty about their inadequacies and appraise themselves as incompetent just because there are other parents on social media who appear to do even better. Covid-19 and the shift towards working from home around the world stirred considerable individual reflection and social media debate over parenting practices – what to encourage, enhance or eschew. Such discourse, while healthy in some ways, can also amplify parenting anxiety. Future research on perceptions of parenting and de facto norms for good parenting and the role that social media plays in shaping them will help to raise parents' awareness that such 'norms' exist and how these may influence their feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy.

Publicness and performative parenting on social media also have implications for children's development and parent–child relations. Children are omnipresent in their parents' lives via the social media vignettes – text, photos, videos – that showcase and underscore persistent performativity. By the same token, social media and other parental apps serve as a virtual 'umbilical cord' (Ribak, 2009) that allows parents to be omnipresent in children's school lives (Lim, 2020). While such constant connectivity assures parents of children's academic performance and wellbeing, it also extends the boundary of parental surveillance and control and results in parents' over-involvement in children's educational endeavours (see, for example, Caronia, 2008; Lim, 2020; Nelson, 2010). Over time, over-active parental interventions may deprive children of autonomy and space for personal growth, which has negative impacts on children's development and parent–child relationships. Longitudinal interdisciplinary research can be conducted to better apprehend such issues.

Social media and the performative parenting culture that grows out of it have also transformed the normative standards and expectations of being a 'good parent'. In the current technologically mediated environment, parental obligations have expanded far beyond the traditional parenting role of caregiving in the domestic sphere to

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include complicated education and relationship management in both offline and online realms. Parents now are pressured to live a life of 'transcendent parenting' in which they must constantly transcend the physical distance between them and their children, strategically navigate myriad parental apps and groups, and make connections with all the relevant people and resources that might be helpful to children's education (Lim, 2020). With intense digital connectivity and extensive social networks, norms for 'good parenting' seem increasingly unyielding. Small failures in parenting, such as inappropriate expression of ideas in a parent group or overlooking information from the teacher, can subject parents to scrutiny and judgement that stoke feelings of insecurity and perhaps resentment.

It has been observed that when people encounter transformative technology, it can shape even their inner lives and relationships (Turkle, 2011). The parents who have been bound through their children to these parent–teacher conferencing apps and drawn into these tight digital networks of teachers and peer parents have had to succumb to the publicness and performativity of parenting. And yet, however unwelcome, they soldier on to negotiate these pressures for the benefit of their children in their overriding quest for academic excellence. Fundamentally, therefore, we as a society must pause to consider whether the technological amplification of such social pressures should simply be accepted or whether we can strive consciously towards undoing this undesirable trend. In so doing, parents and children can have a respite from being always on show to taking a breather on the 'back stage'.

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