

Representations of motherhood on social media: The stress of unrealistic perfectionism

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Abstract: This article examines the ways in which motherhood identities are constructed on social media. With the increasing digitalization, individuals present their selves and social roles on social media platforms. In this process, which can be analyzed within the framework of Goffman’s dramaturgical approach, individuals construct identities by performing idealized roles on a specific “stage” in accordance with the expectations of their audience. Motherhood is also influenced by this process and is represented in various forms on social media, bringing different motherhood typologies to the forefront. The article defines the motherhood identities such as tiger mom, alpha mom and wine mom in the literature, in addition to them beige mom identity, which is increasingly widespread in social media. The tiger mom prioritizes children’s academic success with a strict and demanding parenting style. The alpha mom strives for success in both her child’s and her own life, often pursuing unattainable perfection. The wine mom adopts a humorous, sarcastic approach to the struggles of motherhood but risks normalizing alcohol consumption. The beige mom, characterized by minimalism, natural living, and neutral-toned aesthetics, promotes a specific parenting ideal but may impose rigid lifestyle expectations. Each model presents unique challenges for mothers, children, and families. This study has established a theoretical framework by reviewing academic sources indexed in the Web of Science database between 2020-2025, while also incorporating an analysis of the beige mom identity, which has not yet been academically examined in the context of social media. The aim of this article is to analyze how motherhood identities are constructed on social media, how they are shaped by societal expectations, and the impact these representations have on women. The findings highlight that the romanticization of motherhood and its portrayal within rigid frameworks on social media may create pressure on mothers and reinforce traditional gender norms.

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Introduction

The era we are currently experiencing has transitioned through numerous socio-economic and cultural transformations, leading to a period where technology and its associated components -such as artificial intelligence, big data, the internet of things, and smart cities- have gained significant prominence and speed. According to the World Bank's 2023 data, the global population stands at 8.06 billion people (World Bank 2023). A more recent update from the Digital 2025 Global Overview Report, published in collaboration between We Are Social and Meltwater, indicates that the world's population has risen to 8.20 billion. What is particularly striking, yet unsurprising in today's increasingly digitalized world, is that approximately 70.5% of this population owns a mobile phone, with around 87% of these being smartphones (We Are Social 2025). The same report provides data on internet usage rates, stating that as of early 2025, a total of 5.56 billion people -approximately 67.9% of the global population- use the internet. Although it remains unclear whether user identities are duplicated, the number of global social media user accounts corresponds to approximately 63.9% of the world's population (Ibid). These figures alone offer critical insights into the expanding role of digitalization and social media in our daily lives, the increasing level of human interaction and connectivity, as well as the evolving habits and routines shaped by these changes.

Individuals who present themselves and their lives -within the scope and format they choose- on digital platforms also bear witness to the lives of others, albeit to the extent that they are presented. This can be interpreted as both a self-presentation and an identity construction process in social media. Rather than individual identities, the process appears to be more prominently shaped by how social roles -such as motherhood, fatherhood, or professional careers- are presented. At this point, the topic can be examined through Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. This approach, which seeks to explain how individuals present their idealized rather than their actual selves, offers a sociological framework for understanding "how individuals present themselves and their actions, how they guide and control the impressions others form about them, and what they can or cannot do in front of others" (Goffman 2009). In Goffman's terms, if social media

is regarded as a “stage” and the environments, furnishings, décor, or backgrounds used in these presentations as a “set” (Ibid, 33), then individuals engage in “performances” (Ibid, 29-30) through the activities they carry out before specific audiences (followers) that leave an impression on them. The consistency between these performances provides information about the “actor” through what Goffman terms a “personal front” (Ibid, 34-35), which reflects the individual’s general appearance and manner (Ibid, 36). Social media users, who aim to present themselves in a desirable manner to their followers, tend to stage performances that align with socially approved values. In this sense, roles such as the caring mother, the strong and wealthy husband, or the diligent student serve as idealized performance presentations sanctioned by society. This phenomenon not only facilitates self-presentation but also contributes to identity construction, fostering both a desire and, an expectation among observers to adopt similar roles.

Also, motherhood emerges as a constructed and performed social role and identity within the realm of social media. Patriarchal structures, with their deep-rooted ties to traditional gender roles, seek to reinforce male dominance by emphasizing women’s domestic roles even more strongly in the face of societal changes and transformations. In this regard, motherhood can serve as a critical point of analysis in defining the nature and content of the relationship’s women establish with their children, particularly as women transition into the public sphere and advocate for gender equality. This article seeks to define the typologies of motherhood that are predominantly presented on contemporary social media platforms, where they are often portrayed as idealized identities.

The study follows these methodological steps: first, a search was conducted in the Web of Science database using the keywords “social media” AND “mom” OR “mother.” The search results were then filtered to include articles published between 2020 and 2025, after which those specifically addressing motherhood identities were selected. The most frequently cited works were used to establish a theoretical framework. However, the review of the literature revealed that certain motherhood typologies frequently emphasized in social media have not yet been thoroughly examined. To maintain the study’s relevance, identity definitions related to the beige mom phenomenon were incorporated by analyzing representations in online sources and social media platforms.

Representations of motherhood on social media

As Goffman's explanations of self-presentation in daily life suggest, social media users stage their online presence to present themselves and their lives in a way that allows their audience to gain insight into them and offer approval. These performances are shaped by social norms and the ways in which motherhood is romanticized on digital platforms. A review of the literature reveals that studies have been conducted on the concepts of the tiger mom, wine mom, and alpha mom. In addition to these, the beige mom identity -frequently observed on social media but not yet addressed in the literature- is also defined in this study.

Tiger mom

The term “tiger mom”, which describes a mother who approaches her children with high academic expectations, strictness, and demands, first appeared in Amy Chua's 2011 book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, sparking various debates (Xie & Li 2017). These debates largely centred on Chua's claim that Chinese mothers are superior to Western mothers. It is likely that this controversy contributed to the popularization of the “tiger mom” model on social media and accelerated the shift of parenting competition to digital platforms.

Like other forms of hyper-parenting, this representation of motherhood has increasingly been highlighted on social media in recent years. “Tiger moms”, who expect extraordinary achievements from their children and push them toward success (Chua 2011), can be seen as a contemporary version of the “hyper-parenting” styles summarized by Janssen (2025, 55):

Helicopter parents who try to solve all of their children's problems and protect them from all dangers; *little emperor parents* who strive to give their children all the material goods they crave and parents who practice *concerted cultivation* by scheduling their children into several extracurricular activities to provide them with an advantage.

It is possible to find numerous posts on digital platforms under the hashtag #TigerMom, where mothers showcase their children's academic and athletic achievements. On TikTok, trends such as the tiger mom challenge occasionally emerge, featuring both content that glorifies strict parenting and posts that critique this concept through humour.

Prioritizing a child's academic success and providing the necessary resources for it is an important and expected parental attitude.

Especially in today's increasingly competitive environment, individuals who are disciplined and hardworking from a young age gain significant advantages in their professional lives, particularly in terms of resilience, self-confidence, and goal-oriented work. However, other factors related to childhood development must not be overlooked. Excessive discipline and pressure for academic success may lead to various issues, including stress, disruption of age-specific developmental tasks (e.g., needing to study instead of playing and socializing), intense fear of failure, and the development of a personality overly dependent on a strong authority figure.

While these are the potential consequences for children, such an approach to motherhood can also have detrimental effects on a woman's mental well-being. A mother who is constantly preoccupied with raising a successful child may subordinate her own personal desires and needs. Over time, this can lead to burnout, anxiety disorders, and tensions within the family. Ultimately, both dimensions of this issue can contribute to the deterioration of family relationships and, in extreme cases, even lead to family breakdown. In this regard, it is crucial to analyze the tiger mom typology -often presented on social media as an idealized and aspirational form of motherhood- by considering all of these elements.

Wine mom

As stated at the beginning of the text, the patriarchal structure of society imposes specific roles based on gender, thereby attempting to maintain a certain control mechanism. In the context of motherhood, this control manifests in the perception that the mother is the primary caregiver responsible for the child's well-being. Positioned as the primary figure who must meet all of the child's needs in the best possible way, the mother often struggles under the heavy burden of childcare as well as the ever-increasing societal expectations. The pressure and expectation to be a "good mother" can sometimes place mothers in a state of uncertainty. Defining and delineating what is considered "good" is inherently difficult and highly variable. The mother's burden is not limited to these challenges alone; when additional responsibilities such as work, spousal duties, and household responsibilities are factored in, the process can become even more overwhelming for her.

The "wine mom" discourse, as Newman and Nelson (2021) state, "encourages women to self-soothe through alcohol consumption,

accepting the inevitable feelings of failure imposed by intensive motherhood standards and the lack of structural support within society.” This discourse has gained popularity on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook under the hashtag, #WineMom. It portrays mothers sharing photos or videos of themselves with a glass of wine at the end of the day as a means of coping with the exhaustion and stress of bearing full responsibility for their children.

Harding et al. (2021) state that the use of the wine mom identity as a cultural term is intriguing; although the concept has been discussed in media formats such as online parenting magazines and personal blogs, it has received limited academic attention. However, the discourse and related social media posts “provide increasing evidence that alcohol consumption among women -particularly in North America- has been rising and is becoming normalized as a form of stress relief and empowerment among women” (Harding et al. 2021). The romanticization and widespread promotion of alcohol consumption, despite its potential to lead to serious health problems, has faced significant criticism (Cefaretti-Berlin and Barrett 2024; Harding et al. 2021; Hill and Mazurek 2023; Newman and Nelson 2021; Romo et al. 2024).

Furthermore, Harding et al. (2021) reference Gill’s (2007) analysis of post feminism’s role in media culture, stating that postfeminist cultural representations tend to focus on themes such as the female body, individualism, choice, empowerment, self-surveillance, and discipline. They argue that the #WineMom culture on Instagram embodies many of these postfeminist themes, portraying women’s decisions as freely made while symbolizing empowerment and overcoming issues traditionally associated with social movements (Harding et al. 2021). Newman and Nelson (2021, 4) summarize the significance of this issue as follows:

“Wine mom” discourse results from the patriarchal patterns of intensive motherhood. Social forces pressure mothers to conform to hegemonic mothering while denying them the structural support necessary to successfully perform those standards. The inability to achieve these expectations results in mothers wrestling with feelings of failure and strain.

The normalization of excessive alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism for the stress caused by unsupported motherhood responsibilities can have significant consequences, particularly for

mothers' mental health. While the "wine mom" identity may sometimes be adopted humorously -or even as a way to appear more "cool" and socially relatable- it also reflects a deeper reality: the struggle of mothers who feel overwhelmed by the unattainable standards of intensive mothering. Rather than serving as a feminist reclaiming of personal identity, this model of motherhood has the potential to create challenges not only in the mother-child relationship and within the family but also in broader societal dynamics as the issue escalates.

Alpha mom

Within the scope of this study's thematic limitations, a literature review revealed that, unlike other motherhood typologies, there is only one academic study specifically addressing the alpha mom concept. This is likely due to the fact that discussions surrounding this concept took place primarily in the early 2000s.

"Alpha moms" are educated, tech-savvy, Type A moms with a common goal: mommy excellence (...) The term, coined by a cable television channel, refers to the ideal mother in contemporary society (...) One characteristic of the alpha mom is that she is online 87 minutes a day on average. (Chae 2014, 504)

The "alpha mom" strives for excellence not only in motherhood but in all aspects of her life (Germic et al. 2021). As evident from these definitions, the alpha mom is driven by an unachievable ideal of perfect motherhood while simultaneously prioritizing her own individual success. In this sense, rather than embodying a solely child-centred model of motherhood, the alpha mom integrates career and personal achievements into her identity, positioning them as key aspects of self-fulfillment. Although the alpha mom model may appear to have been replaced by the tiger mom model in recent years, notable differences exist between the two. While the tiger mom represents an authoritarian and highly disciplined parenting style focused primarily on the child's success, the alpha mom portrays a modernized, technology-driven, perfectionist motherhood model that is not exclusively child-centered. Both models emphasize competitiveness; however, while the tiger mom model builds competition through the child's academic and extracurricular achievements, the alpha mom model extends this competitive drive across all aspects of the mother's life -ranging from child-rearing and academic accomplishments to professional success and technological competence.

Chae (2014, 518) found that celebrity mothers on social media serve as powerful tools in promoting intensive mothering and that, even when these public figures present unrealistic depictions of motherhood, working mothers still feel compelled to compete with them in shaping their own motherhood ideologies. The “alpha mom”’s relentless pursuit of perfection and competitiveness in all areas of life - particularly in relation to the ideal motherhood myth- has led to significant criticism of this model.

Beige mom

In the literature review, various motherhood models conceptualized as “good mothering” or/and “intensive mothering” were discussed. Unlike the other parenting types mentioned, the term “beige mom” is used to describe mothers who adopt a visually oriented lifestyle structured around colours such as bone, ash, stone, cream, and beige - referred to in the literature as muted tones- and who strive to align their homes and, more specifically, their children with this aesthetic.

The discourse of “beige” motherhood (referred to in very few sources as “beige” parenting), which began to be widely used as of January 2024, is considered a by-product of the beige aesthetic that dominates social media and the baby product market. This motherhood model, which finds its space through seemingly harmless or even acceptable discourses (such as minimalism and a calming approach), can, like almost any phenomenon, reach excessive levels and have various impacts on both women and children. Mothers who identify as “beige moms” act based on arguments such as preferring gender-neutral clothing and nursery decor, choosing natural and organic products like unpainted wooden toys and unbleached, dye-free cotton garments, sustaining a minimalist lifestyle, and viewing neutral colours as soothing for parents navigating the chaos of childhood (*The Guardian* 2022; Willets 2024).

Comedian Hayley DeRoche brought attention to this issue through humour by popularizing the terms sad “beige mom” and sad “beige baby”, offering a perspective on both the disappointment caused by the unattainability of aesthetic obligations imposed on women and idealized motherhood roles, as well as the potential negative effects of these pressures on children (Hanson 2023).

Most debates surrounding the sad beige baby trend focus on whether it affects child development. The American Optometric Association acknowledges that high-contrast objects are more likely to

capture a baby's attention (Larsen 2024). Pediatrician Dr. Laura Sigman states that while rapid visual development occurs around six months of age -when babies begin to show preferences for certain colours- research on how colour impacts infant development remains inconclusive (Lee 2023).

In reality, the issue with sad beige mom or sad beige baby is not the colour beige itself. In this context, beige does not inherently signify something sad or melancholic. Rather, the emphasis is on the challenges faced by women who feel pressured to conform to the beige aesthetic, which has been imposed and assigned value as a product of consumer culture. These challenges include the time spent spray-painting furniture or toys, the potential health risks such altered products may pose to children, the constant need to keep light-coloured items clean, the impact on children as they begin to assert their own choices against these imposed restrictions, the effects of this alignment effort on family well-being, and the financial burden of purchasing these often-expensive products. Issues such as children's rights, the best interests of the child, women's empowerment and liberation, caregiving responsibilities, and family and societal well-being are core concerns of social work. Therefore, examining the beige mom trend and its effects from a social work perspective is highly significant.

Conclusion

In this study, the ways in which new motherhood models are constructed as identities created and shaped on digital platforms in connection with the increasing use of social media have been described. Like other social roles, motherhood is shaped around certain norms and ideals; however, its boundaries and dimensions have been constructed with such ambiguity and excessiveness, in line with the characteristics of the era in which it is experienced, that it can be considered "impossible."

Today, with the rise of digitalization and social media platforms, it would not be incorrect to say that motherhood roles have become performative. Mothers, who present themselves on the social media stage through the roles they define to gain approval from viewers and introduce themselves, on the one hand, offer ways to handle the highly demanding burden of childcare, while on the other hand, closely follow what influential mothers are doing. The ways of raising children and the perceptions of how one should be a mother are also shaped under the influence of social media, drawing mothers into a

competitive environment. The goal of raising the most successful child, the state of maintaining a disciplined and authoritative attitude, the act of assuming full responsibility for everything related to the child, or the display of products associated with dominant aesthetic perceptions under the name of child welfare can all be seen as efforts to establish one's identity and achieve the image of the ideal mother.

From a feminist perspective, it can be argued that these motherhood identities reproduce societal pressures on women and integrate motherhood with consumer culture. Although the alpha mother model exhibits discourses and attitudes that emphasize women's strong presence in other areas, good or intensive motherhood is emphasized to a degree that surpasses other areas of success. This can lead mothers into intense tension and stress, which, in turn, may pave the way for the rise of the motherhood model that alleviates the burden of motherhood through alcohol consumption. However, the methods that could address the negative impact of the unrealistic ideal of motherhood are far more diverse and multidimensional than this. For instance, the perception and acceptance that the burden of caregiving is sometimes only and sometimes primarily the mother's responsibility need to change. Mothers should be provided with support resources that allow them to consider their own well-being as well. In this sense, women, or in other words, mothers, need to develop discourses and attitudes that will put an end to the endless competition among themselves. At this point, awareness of the issue needs to be raised, and it should be acknowledged that each child, each mother, and each family have unique dynamics and characteristics, making it necessary to embrace diverse approaches tailored to each family. In the constructed climate of motherhood, it is important to recognize that neoliberal perspectives dominate, that motherhood roles are commercialized as a product of consumer culture, and that certain products are marketed through these roles.

From another perspective, sharing women's experiences is highly valuable. Social media can be considered a significant power in this regard, serving as a platform where women or mothers can share their experiences with one another without any competitive or performative intent. Developing awareness through others' experiences or knowing that there are others who share similar experiences can contribute to individual empowerment. In this sense, approaching the sharing of femininity or motherhood experiences on social media within this

framework could create an alternative environment to the current situation.

In conclusion, the transformation of motherhood identities on social media offers a space for individual liberation (such as self-expression) while also creating new mechanisms of social pressure. Digital platforms make different narratives of motherhood visible, but they also function as a space where certain norms and ideals are reinforced. In this context, critically evaluating how motherhood gains representation on social media presents an important area of discussion in terms of gender equality and the structural pressures experienced by women.

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