ABSTRACT

PARENTS FRAME CHILDHOOD FOR THE WORLD TO SEE IN DIGITAL MEDIA POSTINGS

by

Ayşenur Benevento

Adviser: Professor Colette Daiute

With the wellbeing of children being at the center of contemporary media discourse (Livingstone & Bovill, 2013), developmental studies are ever more challenged to understand both children's and adults' behavior in online spaces. Parents and children are involved in the human development process in complementary ways (Johansson, 2010; Uprichards, 2008) while using media platforms. While development and use of innovative media technology is accelerating at a fast pace, theory and methods for analyzing uses of digital media for human development have lagged behind. This study examines adults' postings of photos of children on social media and offers a theory-based methodological approach to studying the role of media as a cultural narrative process. The study considers posting behavior as a cultural practice as enacted with Instagram hashtags of *#fashionkids* and *#letthekids*. A major innovation of this study is first, to enact the concept and method of cultural analysis to the postings as a 21st century practice. Having applied this theory-based method, the study also offers findings about the quite diverse values that emerge across two specific digital parenting communities, with implications for ongoing research.

Research questions guiding this study include 1) How do the two digital cultures of childhood postings manifest themselves? 2) How do values depicted in photographs organize childhood postings and aspire for audience? 3) How do parents and children use photographs of children to make sense of childhood? To answer these questions, a sample of Instagram captions and photographs with hashtags of *fashionkids* and *letthekids* posted in a 12-day period in 2016 were collected and analyzed. In addition, a

projective activity, where children (ages 7-10) and mothers created a story about a sample picture depicted as *fashionkid* and *letthekid,* was conducted.

Sampling of postings with *#fashionkids* and *#letthekids* and analyses of representative examples of the postings across the two hashtags indicated that these hashtags constitute cultures defined by distinct values (norms and beliefs) of ideal childhoods. Specifically, meanings conveyed in the *#fashionkids* culture appear to reflect clear and consistent motives about looking good, gender, posing, and possessions across the captions and photographs. Posts with *#letthekids,* on the other hand, revealed diversity of meanings, including conflicting and ambivalent ones regarding children's emotional distance to the parent, the audience and the life at home. The diverse emphasis in values expressed in children's photographs, in turn, allowed mothers and children to highlight different values they have about media use and parents' strong influence in children's depiction in photographs. Findings from the comparative analysis of postings and participants' narratives 1) provide a method for research design and analysis to understand the construction of childhood in contemporary times and thus insights into how parents are using the Internet to define childhood in society, 2) reveal how societal values, in this case, about childhood, are performed in digital spaces, 3) provide a foundation for a discussion about children's privacy rights and, 4) provide a basis for furthering parent's understanding of the significance of their practices in online spaces.

Keywords: digital media, parenting, visual narrative, childhood, Instagram