

Intrasexual Competition and Mothers: Perceptions of Those Who Self-promote and Derogate Their Rivals

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ABSTRACT

It has been previously demonstrated that women who utilize the competitor derogation strategy (which requires fierce and explicit tactics to secure resources) are perceived more negatively than those who utilize the self-promoting strategy (which includes subtler tactics to secure resources). Some of these resources are directly related to and for the benefit of a woman's offspring. However, it remains unknown how women who use these strategies for accessing resources for their offspring are perceived by potential rivals (other females) and potential mates (males). We propose that mothers who derogate their competition (other mothers) will be seen more negatively than those who self-promote. Using a pre-post study design, female participants rated 12 mothers' photographs for attractiveness, competency as a mother, and personality. In the pre-condition participants rated the woman in the photograph, while in the post-condition the participants rated her after being told the woman made a 'Facebook post' containing maternal competitor derogation or self-promotion. Differences in pre-post ratings were calculated, with change presumably caused by strategy use. Results indicate women who promote their maternal competency via self-promotion are perceived to be less likeable compared to baseline ratings, and women who derogate their competition are perceived less positively on the majority of attributes.

KEYWORDS

Maternal Competition, Derogation, Promotion, Intrasexual, Women

Research on women's intrasexual competition has mainly addressed how they compete for access to, or retention of mates (see Fisher, 2013 for a review). The form of this competition is typically of an indirect nature, commonly in the form of gossip and relational attacks (Campbell, 1999; 2004). This indirectness may be related to women being the primary caretakers of children, and hence, if they were harmed during a direct, physical altercation, it could have severe consequences for the fitness of themselves plus any dependent children (see Campbell, 1999).

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The two most well documented competitive strategies are self-promotion and competitor derogation (see Fisher & Cox, 2011). In self-promotion, the most frequently used strategy, women seek to promote their mate value relative to other women usually using the vehicle of physical appearance (Fisher & Cox, 2011). However, self-promotion also includes acting kind and friendly, sharing common interests with one's potential mate, and trying to draw positive attention to oneself. In contrast, competitor derogation is when women attempt to decrease the relative mate value of other women via criticizing or 'putting down' rivals (see Buss & Dedden, 1990; Fisher et al., 2010).

Although these two strategies have been well studied in terms of mating competition (see Fisher, 2013), we contend that they are applicable to other situations involving reproductive success. For example, mothers may also use self-promotion and competitor derogation about mothering-relevant issues in an attempt to garner their child(ren) status and resources. Similar to Fisher and colleagues (2010), who investigated how female derogators were viewed by others within a mating context, in this study, we examine perceptions of mothers who use these two strategies.

Theoretically, mothers need to compete to gain access to limited material resources (e.g., food, shelter, clean drinking water; see Fisher & Moule, 2013; Stockley & Campbell, 2013), and scarce non-material resources (e.g., time, energy; Hays, 1996; Linney et al., 2016) that presumably impact on the fitness of dependent children. Mothers typically also invest in their children by teaching them social resources such as a fashion sense, an ability to think critically, social skills, and even money management; such abstract qualities that go beyond mere survival skills are considered by some to be the very heart of competitive mothering (i.e., Linney et al., 2016). Mothers help children develop necessary traits and social skills, called social reproduction, to provide them with a competitive edge that allows the child to move beyond her or his peers (Linney et al., 2016, p. 94).

Mothers may additionally actively compete to show their competency as parents. Heisler and Ellis (2008) argue that the maternal role is a social construction built through social interactions with others. They contend mothers use a "mommy face" when projecting their maternal competency, due to the need to be perceived as a "good mother" and to continue to build a maternal identity for display (Heisler & Ellis, 2008). One avenue mothers may use to display their competency is social media, as it allows for easy impression management (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2017; Hogan, 2010) and presents an effective opportunity to manipulate the perception of an audience (Baumesiter, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). We suggest a woman who wants to be seen as a competent mother will monitor her online social media presence to continually portray maternal competency. She may do so by posting *Facebook* announcements about her children, or about her abilities as a mother. Anecdotal evidence from *Facebook* that we observed in our newsfeeds during a one-week period suggests mothers often do post photographs of their children and comment on their strength, beauty, or other positive characteristics, brag about their children's accomplishments, or discuss their success as a parent (e.g., preparing a fancy baked good for a sale at their children's school, designing ornate Halloween costumes).

One may self-promote her maternal competency by ensuring her child is, for example, socially adept, well-liked, and popular, polished and well-dressed, and appearing happy and clean in all photographs posted on social media (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Linney et al., 2016). Further, based on previous research on intrasexual competition, mothers may derogate the relative maternal competency of other women in an effort to appear to be higher in this dimension. Perceptions of maternal competency may be particularly important for two reasons. First, there is cross-cultural evidence that men prefer women who display traits related to being good mothers (Buss, 1989), and hence, women higher on this dimension may possess higher mate quality. Second, perceptions of maternal competency may influence inclusion in social circles (e.g., ‘mommy groups’), formation of friendships, and so on (Heisler & Ellis, 2008; May, 2008).

Taking this idea one step further, we propose that mothers are assessed not only with respect to maternal competency but also in terms of characteristics that are widely considered to be preferred by men. These traits include: (a) physical attractiveness, (b) intelligence, (c) sexual willingness, (d) loyalty, (e) friendliness, (f) promiscuity, (g) kindness, (h) trustworthiness, and (i) likeability. Note that all traits except promiscuity are called hereafter “positive attributes” as they are generally desirable (e.g., Buss, 1989), while promiscuity is considered undesirable. Although the focus of the current study is how perceptions of maternal competency may be altered due to a mother engaging in self-promotion or competitor derogation, we included these other dimensions to see if they also were effected (*i.e.*, in keeping with Fisher et al., 2010).

In the current study, we used a pre-post design. Baseline evaluations of women for the characteristics previously listed (as well as a rating of overall desirability as a mate) were compared to ratings after a hypothetical social media post about their mothering behaviour as framed in terms of maternal competency. The posts contained information that was either self-promoting or derogating other mothers. Our hypotheses were as follows:

H1: Compared to pre-condition ratings, we hypothesize women’s ratings of positive attributes will decrease (with an increase in the negative attribute of promiscuity) following the mothers’ utilization of a self-promotion strategy, as such information will be perceived as boasting about their mothering abilities. Boasting is generally perceived negatively and can cause a decline in more favourable perceptions (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989).

H2: We further hypothesize there will be a significantly larger decrease in ratings of positive attributes (and an increase in promiscuity) following the use of a competitor derogation strategy, as compared to self-promotion. Past research indicates female derogators are negatively perceived (Fisher et al., 2010), and hence, the drop in positive evaluations is predicted to be strongest for derogators of other mothers’ maternal competency.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 120 women completed the study ($M_{\text{age}} = 23.33$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 6.92$). All participants were students at a public university in Eastern Canada and received a small course credit as compensation. Nearly half of the participants identified as being in a committed romantic relationship (46%) and more than one-third identified as single (33%). The majority of participants identified as exclusively heterosexual (60%), followed by predominantly heterosexual and only incidentally homosexual (14%). A few participants identified as bi-sexual (4%), and no participants identified as exclusively homosexual. We note that this distribution is atypical, but possibly caused by the fact that there was a major study on non-heterosexual orientations occurring simultaneously using the same participant pool. The majority of participants reported having no children (80%) while 11% reported being a mother (11%). Most participants identified as Caucasian (77%), followed by equal distribution of identification as Asian, African Canadian, and Middle Eastern (all 2%), with the remaining participants self-identifying as other, preferred to not say, or did not answer this question.

Measures and Procedure

Participants signed up for the study, which was advertised as being about mothers, and followed a link to the Qualtrics survey. In the first condition, the participant was presented with 12 photographs of women's faces, one at a time, which were manipulated to appear as though they were *Facebook* profile photographs. The photographs were of faces oriented directly toward the camera and obtained from various online sources. The faces were presented in colour with standard grey backgrounds, head size was consistent, and all faces displayed a slightly positive expression. All faces were also free of eye glasses and jewelry. Underneath each face, participants were asked, "How _____ do you think this woman is?" using a Likert-type scale with 1 = very low and 7 = very high. The 10 attributes for each woman were as follows: physically attractive, intelligent, loyal, friendly, promiscuous, kind, trustworthy, overall desirable as a mate, competent as a mother, and likeable. Following these initial ratings, participants completed a demographics survey (and other surveys external to the study) to serve as distractor tasks.

Then, participants were shown the same 12 faces individually and in a different order, and each one was accompanied by a hypothetical *Facebook* post. The participants were told: "On the following pages, you are asked to review a series of 12 faces. Below is a *Facebook* profile with pictures of a mother in a 'mommy and me' group and one of her *Facebook* posts. Please rate this woman using the scales provided." The 'posts' was one of six containing a self-promotion statement (*i.e.*, indicating their own high-quality parenting abilities) or one of six containing a competitor derogation statement (*i.e.*, criticizing other mother's parenting abilities). The faces were randomly matched to the self-promotion or competitor derogation statements.

The statements were specifically created for this study. They were worded according to what one expects to see on *Facebook* (*e.g.*, short and written in causal English; actual samples from *Facebook* were used to inspire the posts used in this

study). These statements were piloted with eight women, blind to the study's purpose, and separate from the sample who completed the study, to determine that they were clearly self-promoting or competitor-derogating. Statements are shown in Appendix A. Participants were provided with a debriefing at the end of the study that explained the photographs were not of known mothers but rather sourced from the Internet, and the posts were mock-ups and not from *Facebook*.

RESULTS

The dependent variables used in the analyses were the mean post-pre difference scores for each of the 10 attributes, collapsed across the six faces associated with posts displaying self-promotion or collapsed across the six faces associated with posts displaying competitor derogation. For example, there was a mean difference calculated for the attractiveness for mothers who self-promoted and separately, for those who derogated. To test whether there was a significant difference due to the competition strategy, 10 paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted on the mean post-pre difference, with a Bonferroni adjusted alpha to offset error associated with the number of comparisons ($\alpha = .05/10 = .005$).

Self-Promotion Condition. There was only one a significant difference; likeability significantly decreased from the first condition (photograph only $M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.01$) to the second condition (photograph and hypothetical *Facebook* post $M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.12$); $t(115) = 3.394$, $p = .001$, Cohen's $d = .32$.

Competitor Derogation Condition. There was a significant change in all attributes due to competitor derogation (see Table 1). All attributes decreased, showing a negative influence due to the derogation via the *Facebook* post. The exception was promiscuity where a decrease would indicate the mothers were considered as less promiscuous (and hence more positively).

Table 1. Dependent *t*-tests for Differences in Mean Ratings Before and After Competitor Derogation Strategy ($n = 116$, $df = 115$)

	Phase 1		Phase 2		<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD			
Attractive	5.86	.79	5.65	.9	3.79	.36	.000
Intelligent	5.46	.85	5.04	.99	6.26	.09	.000
Loyalty	5.28	.89	4.99	.99	4.5	.43	.000
Friendly	5.13	.85	4.44	1.02	8.94	.85	.000

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Promiscuity	4.03	1.1	3.81	1.37	2.47	.30	.002
Trustworthy	4.93	.09	4.41	.1	7.36	7.56	.000
Kind	5.09	.08	4.37	.97	10.3	1.67	.000
Desirable	5.77	.08	5.59	.88	3.35	.61	.001
Competent	5.33	.09	5.07	.1	3.8	3.82	.000
Likeable	5.3	.1	4.63	.1	9.42	9.02	.000

To test the second hypothesis that attribute ratings in the competitor derogation condition would show a greater decrease compared to the self-promotion condition, a repeated measures Multivariate Analysis of Variance model was created with the difference for each attribute as the dependent variable and strategy type (*i.e.*, self-promotion versus competitor derogation) as the independent variable. There was a main effect for strategy, $F(1,230) = 1174.24$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .84$, and for attributes, $F(9, 222) = 314.86$, $p < .000$, partial $\eta^2 = .93$, as well as a significant interaction, $F(9,222) = 324.045$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .93$.

We then used univariate Analysis of Variance models to explore the interaction of strategy with attribute. All attributes were rated significantly lower in the competitor derogation condition than the self-promotion condition, except for promiscuity (see Table 2). The mean difference in ratings of promiscuity failed to reach significance ($F(1,115) = .206$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$, *ns*). Mothers were perceived as significantly more attractive, loyal, trustworthy, desirable, intelligent, friendly, kind, competent, and likeable when they were self-promoting compared to competitor derogating (see Table 2). Derogating mothers were rated lower on all attributes compared to when mothers self-promoted.

Table 2. Univariate Effects of Competition Strategy on Attribute Mean Rating Difference ($n = 116$, $df = 1, 115$).

Attributes	Mean Difference in Rating		F	Partial η^2
	Promotion	Derogation		
Attractive	.08 (.51)	-.21 (.6)	29.97**	.207
Intelligent	-.02 (.63)	-.42 (.72)	34.74**	.232
Loyalty	.06 (.57)	-.29 (.7)	23.63**	.170
Friendly	-.03 (.58)	-.8 (.89)	86.16**	.428

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Promiscuity	-.18 (.76)	-.21 (.74)	.21 (<i>ns</i>)	.002
Trustworthy	.03 (.56)	-.53 (.77)	47.35**	.292
Kind	-.03 (.52)	-.76 (.8)	98.36**	.461
Desirable	.08 (.48)	-.17 (.56)	15.85**	.121
Competent	.02 (.67)	-.26 (.74)	14.31**	.111
Likeable	-.18 (.57)	-.68 (.79)	44.52**	.279

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

The current study provides evidence that people may be influenced by social media posts about one's maternal competency. Our findings show that mothers who post self-promoting information were evaluated to be less likeable, but that there was no decrease in the other positive attributes. There was also no change in ratings of promiscuity. In contrast, our results support the hypothesis that posts containing derogating information causes mothers to be seen as significantly less competent as mothers, as well as less physically attractive, intelligent, loyal, friendly, kind, trustworthy, desirable, and likeable. They are perceived to be less promiscuous, which warrants future attention. In general, competition via derogation caused a significantly larger decrease in evaluations of positive attributes than self-promotion.

The first hypothesis of a decrease in the favourable perception of mothers who promoted their mothering ability (e.g., bragging about their competency or bragging about their child's success as an extension of their mothering competency) compared to women who derogated their competition (e.g., criticized other women's maternal competence) was only weakly supported. Surprisingly, only likeability was significantly influenced by self-promotion. The lack of any difference between phase one (just the photographs) versus phase two (photographs accompanied by *Facebook* posts) may be at least partly due to self-promotion being extremely common and easily disguisable as self-improvement (Fisher & Cox, 2011). A quick glance on *Facebook* reveals the noteworthy presence of female self-promotion in general (Guitar & Carmen, 2017). Perhaps promoting one's maternal competency is so common on *Facebook* that it is not as noticeable as it would be if it were done via another medium or in person, and thus tends to not influence perception of character. Indeed, the present study indicates sharing milestones and achievements, including children's achievements, is perceived as an inappropriate reason to scrutinize a mother's character and potential underlying motives.

The second hypothesis was that mothers who derogate other mothers (hence questioning their competency) would be perceived less favourably than mothers who self-promote. All attributes were rated significantly lower for mothers'

who derogated their competition compared to when they self-promoted. This prediction was supported with the exception promiscuity. In general, our findings align with the previous research that indicates derogators may seem cruel and mean-spirited (e.g., Buss & Dedden, 1990; Fisher et al., 2010), and thus, it is a risky strategy to deploy.

As mentioned, we predicted ratings of promiscuity would increase, congruent with the negative perception of those who derogate. The lack of significant difference in pre-post ratings of promiscuity aligns with Fisher and colleagues (2010) who report highly similar results. In their study, women who derogated another woman's sexuality or personality were not judged to be any more promiscuous compared to baseline evaluations. Therefore, we conclude that assessments of promiscuity may be removed from intrasexual competition, or not reliably evaluated using just photographs of faces, and more research is needed.

A noteworthy limitation of the current study is that it relied on an undergraduate student sample. Moreover, while we sourced the photographs from a variety of online locations in an effort to find high resolution colour images of women approximately the same age (about 24), we have no information on the actual maternal status of the evaluated women. It would be interesting to explore whether participants can guess from photographs who is actually a mother. Future research needs to examine whether the stereotype of harried mothers without make-up or cleanly styled hair is an accurate signal maternal status (e.g., Boley, 2017), or if there are actual morphological changes apparent on women's faces. Further, it may be advantageous to explore perceptions of mothers who use these strategies, as evaluated by other mothers. Perhaps mothers are more in-tune with those who indicate their maternal competency via self-promotion in particular, given that they themselves may rely on such a strategy.

The novelty of the present study is that it builds on the existing knowledge of female-female competition and adds to the very small but critical developing area of maternal competition (Fisher, Burch, & Sokol-Chang, 2017; Fisher & Moule, 2013; Linney et al., 2017; Sokol-Chang, Burch, & Fisher, 2017). There is a noticeable dearth of research on competitive mothers, competition with respect to maternal competency, and even the reasons underlying so-called "mommy judging" (*i.e.*, how mothers are judged by others) or "mommy wars" (e.g., others' criticism about one's mothering, such as by being perceived as hyper-vigilant or under-vigilant, or a stay-at-home versus working mother). The work that does exist is sociological or culturally specific (e.g., Abetz & Moore, 2018), and an evolutionary perspective is needed.

This project explored a previously understudied form of intrasexual competition: maternal competition. Self-promotion and competitor derogation were investigated to assess how mothers were rated by other women when they engaged in one of these two competitive strategies. The overall conclusion of the study is that mothers who post information about maternal competency on social media such as *Facebook* may fare better if they self-promote than derogate other mothers, but that such posts potentially harm their likeability.

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APPENDIX A

Competitive Statements for Maternal Competency

(SP refers to self-promotion statements and CD indicates competitor derogation statements.)

Baked cookies with my kids last night, I feel like I'm making it as a mom! (SP)

OMG, today I saw a mom smoking while playing in the park with her child! That's awful (CD)

I saw a mom yell and smack her kid... I couldn't imagine doing that (CD)

Everyone tells me how adorable and well behaved my kid is, I love it (SP)

I can't believe how much my colleague has let herself go and gave up on her figure after having her kid (CD)

My child scored top of the class; all the reading we did in the early years really paid off (SP)

Yesterday there was a kid at the park who was filthy, with ripped clothes, and was crying. Yet the mother was dressed like a model and texting the whole time. Mother of the year... (CD)

Best summer ever, I don't think my kid watched TV once (SP)

My kid just told me I'm the best mom ever! (SP)

My neighbour does absolutely nothing with her kid, all summer long the kid watched TV and didn't play outside (CD)

So glad I can still find time for my beauty and fitness routine as a mom of a young one (SP)

A mom in my kid's play group said she only had a kid so her husband would stay and she could collect childcare bonuses (CD)