



# Parents mention sons more often than daughters on social media

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**Gender inequality starts early in life. Parents tend to prefer boys over girls, which is manifested in reproductive behavior, marital life, and parents' pastimes and investments in their children. While social media and sharing information about children (so-called "sharenting") have become an integral part of parenthood, whether and how gender preference shapes the online behavior of users are not well known. In this paper we use public posts made by 635,665 users from Saint Petersburg on a popular Russian social networking site, to investigate public mentions of daughters and sons on social media. We find that both men and women mention sons more often than daughters in their posts. We also find that posts featuring sons receive more "likes" on average. Our results indicate that girls are underrepresented in parents' digital narratives about their children, in a country with an above-average ranking on gender parity. This gender imbalance may send a message that girls are less important than boys or that they deserve less attention, thus reinforcing gender inequality from an early age.**

gender inequality | son preference | parenthood | sharenting | social media

**G**ender inequality starts even before birth. Across the world, would-be parents tend to prefer their first (or their only) child to be a boy rather than a girl or to have more sons than daughters (1–8). This results in millions of “missing girls” at birth due to sex-selective abortions (9–11). Gender preference continues to manifest throughout childhood. In some countries, couples pursue sons by having additional children at the cost of having a larger family size and underinvesting in daughters (12, 13). Sons have advantages in nutrition (14), vaccination rates (15), and spending on healthcare (16, 17). Fathers (18–20) [and, in some cases, both parents (21)] spend more time with sons than with daughters. Fathers more often marry and stay married in families with sons (22, 23), although evidence for this is mixed (24, 25). Parents also report more happiness in families with sons (26).

Despite the extensive literature on gender preference, a study to examine whether the use of social media by parents is gender biased is needed. As social media become an integral part of parents' lives, understanding whether and how gender preference manifests in this environment is important. One common practice that has recently become a widespread trend is “sharenting” (27, 28), or parents' habitual use of social media to communicate detailed information about their children (sharenting, *Collins English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/sharenting>). In this paper, we investigate gender preference in sharenting, drawing on data from 62 million public posts on a popular social networking site.

We obtained data from VK ([vk.com](http://vk.com)), a Russian analogue of Facebook and the largest social networking site in Europe. VK provides an application programming interface (API) that allows for the systematic downloading of publicly available information. We used the VK API to collect public posts made in 2016 by 635,665 users from Saint Petersburg (the fourth largest European city), aged 18–50 y (see *SI Appendix* for details

on our sample and data collection). We then identified posts with mentions of children by examining posts that contained the words “daughter” and “son,” along with their different forms, e.g., “dochenka” (daughterling) or “soooooooon” (see *Materials and Methods* for details). Common topics for such posts included celebrations of different achievements and important events (e.g., births and birthdays or starting and finishing school); expression of love, affection, and pride; and reports on spending time with the children (see Fig. 1 for illustrative examples and *SI Appendix* for more information about common topics).

We computed the proportion of female and male users from each cohort who mentioned sons or daughters in their posts at least once, along with the average number of mentions of children for these users. In our analysis, we used various definitions for “mentions of children” to ensure that the results were not influenced by a specific choice of words (*Materials and Methods*). We also collected information about the number of “likes” that posts featuring children obtained on average. We used these data to investigate whether the social network environment might reinforce gender bias by rewarding posts featuring children of one gender more than those of another gender.

## Results

Fig. 2 shows the proportion of users who mentioned children in their public posts at least once in 2016. The proportion of women

### Significance

**Parents' preference for sons is a well-known phenomenon. This study examines whether the use of social media by parents is gender biased. Due to the large-scale use of social media, even a moderate bias might significantly contribute to gender inequality. We use data from a Russian social networking site on posts made by 635,665 users and find that parents mention sons more often than daughters and that posts featuring sons get more "likes." This gender imbalance may send a message that girls are less important than boys or that they deserve less attention. Particularly in a country with an above-average ranking on gender parity, this invisible bias might present an intractable obstacle to gender equality.**

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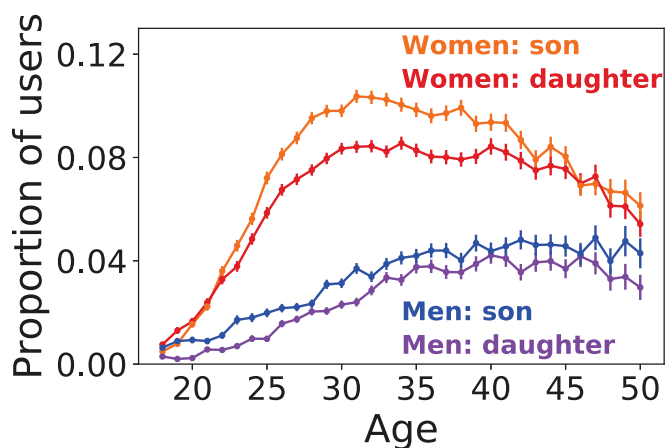
- Michail Ivanov 29 Apr at 08.05 ...  
 Daughter! 3500 g, 51 cm!!!
- Maria Ermolaeva 10 Apr at 11.56 ...  
 10th of April... And only my cheerful little son was delighted with the snow
- Konstantin Leonidov 4 Feb at 18.14 ...  
 Made a snowman with my daughter!
- Olga Stepanova 13 July at 20.06 ...  
 The first medal! You are the best, son

**Fig. 1.** Selected examples of posts with mentions of children. All names and dates have been changed.

increases sharply until 31–32 y old and then gradually falls. The peak matches the average age of women at first childbirth, which is 30 y in Saint Petersburg (29). The proportion of men who mention children is significantly lower and steadily increases with age. In almost all cohorts of users, sons are mentioned by a larger proportion of both men and women. This difference cannot be explained by the sex ratio at birth alone (106 boys to 100 girls in Russia), thus indicating gender preference in sharing information about children. The exact estimate of the observed bias depends on the chosen measure and the set of words that are considered synonyms for the words son and daughter (see *SI Appendix* for detailed analysis).

The method that we use is not without limitations as it allows for false positive and false negative classification of the posts. For instance, “Gazprom’s daughter company” would be counted as a mention of a daughter and thus represents a false positive. Alternatively, people might refer to their daughters and sons using the generic term “child,” and such mentions would not be counted (false negative). If our method produces more false positives related to sons or more false negatives related to daughters, this might explain the observed bias.

To rule out these explanations, we randomly selected 10,000 posts that mentioned daughters and sons and manually checked whether they were about children. We found that 85% of them



**Fig. 2.** The proportion of users who mentioned children in their public posts at least once in 2016. Sons are mentioned by a larger proportion of both men and women. Vertical bars are standard errors.

were about parents’ own children (detailed information is provided in *SI Appendix*, Tables S1 and S2). We used these data to compute the statistical significance of the difference between the number of posts about parents’ own daughters and sons, using the bootstrap test. We found that more posts about sons existed with  $P < 10^{-4}$ . We also performed an additional analysis and found that the bias persisted after the inclusion of generic references to children (*Materials and Methods*).

We also found that posts featuring sons were more rewarded; that is, they got more likes than those featuring daughters. Average numbers of likes are presented in Table 1. Here, three patterns can be distinguished. First, women “liked” posts more often than men. Second, a gender homophily in likes existed; i.e., women preferred posts written by women, and men preferred those written by men. Third, both women and men more often liked posts that mentioned sons.

### Discussion

Studies of gender preference in parental practices usually have to rely on self-reports, e.g., reports about time spent with children (18–21). Self-report studies have some benefits, but their results are affected by various biases, including social desirability bias or recall bias. Mentions in posts are directly observable and present a clear and simple metric that can be used on easily accessible data to measure parents’ gender bias. We used this metric on a large dataset of public posts of more than 600,000 users and found that both men and women exhibited son preference on the social networking site: Sons were mentioned significantly more often than daughters. This result was remarkably stable and held true across age cohorts, different measures, and sets of words. We also found that posts in which sons were mentioned were more rewarded: These posts got around 1.5 times more likes than stories featuring daughters.

Son preference in traditional societies and developing countries is a well-known phenomenon. Our results confirm that son preference is also prevalent in countries not immediately associated with gender disparity. [Russia is above average in the ranking of countries by gender parity (30).]

Gender preference in sharenting may seem quite harmless compared with such layers of gender disparity as sex-selective abortions or underinvestment in girls. However, son bias online may contribute to daughters feeling underappreciated and less visible. It may also have broader effects as gender inequalities in everyday social interactions could translate to larger structures of inequality, leading to gender inequality even in advanced societies (31). Given the widespread popularity of social media, even moderate bias might accumulate. Son preference in likes can additionally amplify this bias, acting as social media’s built-in positive feedback loop. Millions of users are exposed to a gender-biased newsfeed on a daily basis and, without even noticing, receive the reaffirmation that paying more attention to sons is normal.

Previous studies have shown that children’s books are dominated by male central characters (32, 33). In textbooks, females

**Table 1.** The average number of likes per post

Posts	Average no. of likes	
	By women	By men
Written by women		
Featuring daughters	6.7	1.1
Featuring sons	10.7	1.8
Written by men		
Featuring daughters	5.3	2.6
Featuring sons	6.7	3.7

All daughters/sons differences are statistically significant with  $P < 10^{-4}$ .

are given fewer lines of text, have fewer named characters, and have fewer mentions than men (34). Additionally, in movies, on average, twice as many male characters as female ones are in front of the camera (35). While female coverage on Wikipedia compares favorably with that on some other lists of notable people (36), still, four times more articles about men than women exist (37). Gender imbalance in public posts may send yet another message that girls are less important and interesting than boys and deserve less attention, thus presenting an invisible obstacle to gender equality.

## Materials and Methods

We used the API of VK to download all public posts of users from Saint Petersburg that were made in 2016 (available at ref. 38). We then computed vector representations of Russian words by training a fastText (39) model on the collected corpus (our model is available at ref. 38). We used this model to identify words similar to son and daughter, namely the closest words in the vector space measured by cosine distance. We manually excluded unrelated words. For instance, both the words son and “granddaughter” are unsurprisingly semantically close to the word daughter, according to the model. However, these are not synonyms for the word daughter, and we do not treat them as mentions of daughters.

After the exclusion of unrelated words, we obtained a list of the 30 closest synonyms to the word daughter and the 30 closest synonyms to the word son. Posts that included at least one of these words were considered to be posts mentioning children. The use of word embeddings trained on the VK corpus allowed us to consider words or their forms that cannot be found in dictionaries but that are used by the users of the social network, e.g., soon instead of son. We performed an additional analysis to ensure that our results were not driven by a particular choice of words (*SI Appendix*).

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We also removed potentially fake accounts and filtered posts that were not made by users themselves (see *SI Appendix* for details on data preprocessing) and then computed the proportion of users who mentioned children at least once in their posts as well as the average number of such mentions per user.

We used the same model to identify words other than daughter or son that might be used as a reference to children, e.g., “my little one.” Note that unlike in English, in Russian, most of these words have distinct masculine and feminine forms. This allows one to definitively identify whether they are mentions of daughters or sons. The inclusion of these additional words in the lists of synonyms did not affect the results. We found that among the words where gender could not be inferred from the word form, only one instance was frequent enough to have any effect on our results: the word “child,” along with its different forms. One way to check whether this was disproportionately used to refer to a daughter is to infer the gender of a child by looking at other posts made by the same user. We found that the reference to a child was accompanied by the reference to a daughter for 25.9% of users. This means that among those who used the word child at least once in their 2016 posts, 25.9% also used the word daughter or one of its closest forms at least once. The reference to a child was accompanied by the reference to a son for 28.9% of users and was not accompanied by daughter and son references for 54.3% of users. This result does not support the assumption that people may more often refer to the daughters as to the generic child compared with sons. Note that the sum is larger than 100% as some users mention both sons and daughters at some point in time. The extended list of words that might be used as a reference to children is available at ref. 38.

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## Supplementary Information

### Sample and data preprocessing

VK is the largest European social networking site, with more than 100 million active users. It was launched in September 2006 in Russia and provides functionality similar to Facebook. According to VK's Terms of Service: "Publishing any content on his / her own personal page, including personal information, the User understands and accepts that this information may be available to other Internet users taking into account the architecture and functionality of the Site". VK provides an application programming interface (API) that enables the downloading of information systematically from the site. In particular, downloading user profiles from particular educational institutions and within selected age ranges is possible. For each user, obtaining a list of their public posts is also possible. VK's support team confirmed that the data downloaded via their API may be used for research purposes.

One limitation of VK is that its API returns no more than 1,000 users for any request. To collect data on users from Saint Petersburg on a larger scale, we created a list of all high schools in Saint Petersburg and then accessed IDs of users from each age cohort (from 18–50 years old) who indicated on VK that they graduated from each of these schools. As each of these requests returned less than 1,000 users, we were able to collect information about all users who indicated their high school on VK. Note that not all users in the sample currently live in Saint Petersburg, and not everyone on VK indicated their (former) high school in their profile. However, this approach allowed us to collect a large sample of VK users in a systematic way. Another advantage of our approach is that it provided an opportunity to effectively remove fake profiles. To achieve this, we did not include the users who had no friends from their high school on the social networking site in the final sample. The data were collected as part of the Digital Trace project, and the data collection procedure was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the National Research University Higher School of Economics.

We ensured that only posts with authentic content were included in the analysis. We excluded reposts and posts with exactly the same content made by multiple users. We also did not include posts containing URLs to account for potential automatic posting and advertisements by websites or VK applications (e.g., invitations to visit a website or to beat the score in a game). Among users who mentioned children at least once, we found 2.3 posts about sons and 2.1 posts about daughters per woman. There were 1.7 posts about sons and 1.5 posts about daughters per man. This represents 4% of all posts made by these users during the year.

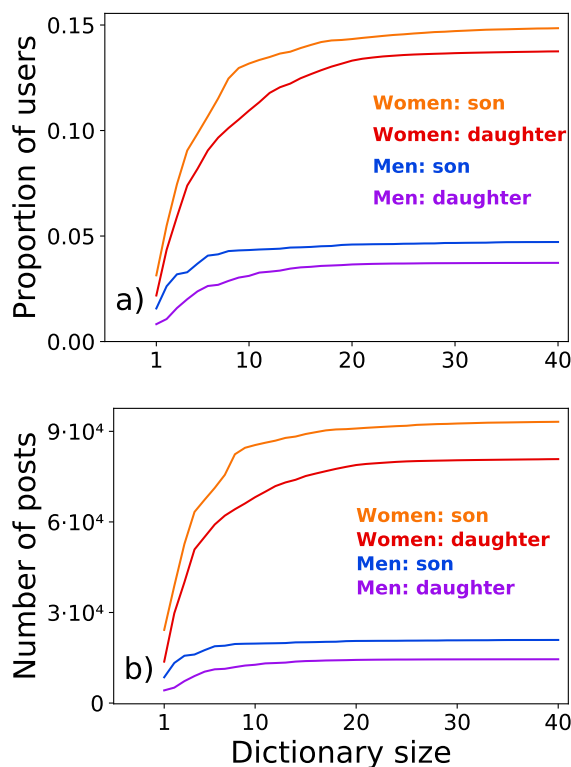


Figure S1: Proportion of users who mention children at least once (a) and the total number of posts with mentions of children (b), as a function of the number of words included in the analysis.

### Dictionary analysis

The exact estimate of the son preference bias might depend on the selection of words that are counted as mentions of children. However, we found that the observed preference for sons holds true, irrespective of the choice of words. To show this, we selected the  $N$  most frequent synonyms and forms of the words "daughter" and "son" from our corpus. We then used these sets of words to compute the proportion of users who mentioned children at least once (Fig. S1a) as well as the total number of posts with mentions of children (Fig. S1b). The son preference bias held true for all  $N = 1, \dots, 40$ . Any changes for larger  $N$  were negligible. For  $N = 40$ , 15% more posts about sons than about daughters were written by women, and 43% more posts about sons were written by men (20% more by both women and men). The list of the most frequent words, along with the number of occurrences of each word, is presented in Table S3.

### Topic analysis

We identified the main topics of posts with mentions of children by analyzing a sample of posts from one age

### Spending time with kids

Went on a bike ride with my son) #bike #biking #onbikes #GulfofFinland  
 #Balticboulevard #stp #weekend @ Ave. of Heroes  
 Our daughter can easily involve us in any of her games! We are never bored! 😊

### Expression of positive feelings

If you knew 😊 how much I love him 🥰🥰🥰🥰 #beloved #son #love #to #play  
 #the #ape #merry #christmas #everybody  
 The son took the 1st place 🏆🏆🏆🏆🏆 I'm happy with the result!!!  
 We got a silver medal yesterday! 🏆🥈🏆 Proud of you, my baby girl!! 🌸💋

### Births and birthdays

Today, 9/10/2016 at 7:15 am, I was again assigned the status of "DAD".  
 My beloved wife gave birth to my daughter.  
 Time flies! My beloved son is three years old now! #happybirthday #beloved #son

Figure S2: Examples of posts featuring children. Authors of the posts provided consent to the use of their posts in this publication. All posts were originally written in Russian and were translated verbatim.

cohort (30 years old). We coded all the men’s posts (879) from this cohort and randomly selected 20% (1,521) of the women’s posts. At the first stage of coding, for each post, we determined the category that most fully described the post’s content. At the second stage, we collapsed similar categories into broader ones.

Only 9% of the posts were not related to the users’ own children (8% among women’s posts and 18% among men’s). These posts included mentions of other people’s children as well as jokes, news, and stories about pets. After filtering out the irrelevant posts, the son preference bias for women was unchanged, and for men, it re-

mained significant: women wrote 15% more posts about sons than about daughters, and men wrote 34% more posts about sons in this age group.

Among the relevant posts, the most common topics were reports of spending time with children (27%), expressions of positive feelings – mostly love, affection, or pride (26%) – and celebrations of births and birthdays (19%) (see Fig. S2 for examples). These three categories accounted for 72% of all posts about users’ own children. Note that the distribution of topics most likely depends on the age of a child and might be different for other cohorts.

Table S1: Percentage of posts about *any* children among posts that included the words “son” or “daughter” and their different forms and synonyms. These statistics were obtained from a random sample of 10,000 posts.

	About daughters	About sons
Posted by women	97.2%	97.6%
Posted by men	97.8%	94.7%

Table S2: Percentage of posts about *users’ own* children among posts that included the words “son” or “daughter” and their different forms and synonyms. These statistics were obtained from a random sample of 10,000 posts.

	About daughters	About sons
Posted by women	84.6%	88.6%
Posted by men	79.1%	69.8%

Table S3: The list of the most frequent words along with the number of occurrences of each word.

сын	27133	дочь	16010
сына	18218	доченька	10477
сынок	11564	дочка	9245
сыночек	7443	доча	7350
сыном	5308	дочери	5415
сыну	4953	дочки	4493
сыночка	4123	доченьки	2622
сынуля	4086	дочкой	2597
сыночку	2091	дочку	2413
сынули	877	дочей	2214
сыночком	793	дочке	2148
сынулей	698	доченьке	1861
сынулька	685	дочи	1229
сыне	660	дочерью	1193
сыночки	609	дочурка	1067
сынуле	606	доченьку	871
сынишка	593	доче	819
сынулю	323	доченькой	755
сынов	293	дочурки	659
сынка	250	дочу	629
сынульки	216	дочурке	375
сынишки	198	дочурку	268
сынульке	188	дочуркой	241
сынчков	182	дочура	120
сынишке	154	дочечка	117
сынулик	151	дочуля	94
сынишку	147	дочурок	83
сыночке	136	дочкин	73
сынки	119	дочечки	58
сынулечка	108	дочуня	58
сынишкой	103	дочкины	49
сынульку	98	доченок	47
сынулькой	96	дочин	39
сынку	84	дочуры	37
сынком	59	дочушка	36
сыночкам	56	доченькам	35
сынишек	52	дочурочка	35
сынуличка	40	дочкина	34
сынкам	40	дочик	30
сыночками	38	дочкою	30