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Learn It, Buy It, Work It: Intensive Pregnancy on Instagram

Katrin Tiidenberg1,2 and Nancy K. Baym3

Abstract
This article analyzes how pregnant women perform their pregnancies on Instagram. We ask whether they rely on and reproduce pre-existing discourses aimed at morally regulating pregnancy, or reject them and construct their own alternatives. Pregnancy today is highly visible, intensely surveilled, marketed as a consumer identity, and feverishly stalked in its celebrity manifestations. This propagates narrow visions of what a “normal” pregnancy or “normal” pregnant woman should be like. We argue that pregnant women on Instagram do pregnancy via three overlapping and complimentary discourses of “learn it,” “buy it,” and “work it.” Together these form the current authoritative knowledge of pregnancy we call “intensive pregnancy” as performed on Instagram. Concurrently, this article highlights how the combined discursive power of hashtags, images, and captions may influence and enforce discursive hegemonies.

Keywords
Instagram, pregnancy, moral regulation of pregnancy, discursive, hegemonies, visual self presentation

Introduction
Once something hidden beneath baggy maternity wear, pregnancy today has become highly visible (Nash, 2005). Women now continue to participate in daily life right up to birth. But this newfound freedom is not unfettered. Women are surrounded by discourses directing them in how to do pregnancy right. Like motherhood, yet less studied, pregnancy is regulated by experts, media, social norms, families, and individual women. Yet, for all the discourses that circulate around pregnancy and motherhood, historically women have rarely been able to negotiate their own constructions in the public eye (Powell, 2010). Social media, in which women often participate with particular enthusiasm (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016), seem to offer an ideal platform for the self-construction of pregnancy.

We know that social media can be a great source of advice for pregnant women, allowing women to share emotions, combat anxiety, and connect with other expecting mothers (Jang & Dworkin, 2014; Johnson, 2015). Posting content about the (unborn) child even builds new social capital for mothers-to-be (Jang & Dworkin, 2014). According to Leaver and Highfield (2016), thousands of sonogram images are shared on Instagram each month (e.g., 11,320 images and videos hashtagged #ultrasound between March and May 2014), clearly indicating that expecting mothers have incorporated the platform into their performances of pregnancy.

Rosalind Gill’s (2007, 2008) foundational work on post-feminist ideology as women’s key source of identity interprets women’s (socially) mediated (self-)representations through the lens of objectification. Evans and Riley (2015) counter that this interpretation of women’s visibility reflects neither their lived experiences nor the nuances of how women embody, rework, or reject dominant discourses. Existing empirical work on women’s use of image-heavy social media such as Instagram and Tumblr.com (Olszanowski, 2014; Tiidenberg, 2015a; Tiidenberg & Gomez-Cruz, 2015) shows people both appropriating and rejecting dominant discourses as well as constructing counter-discourses. Yet, though resistance and subversion are possible via social media, women still face structural pressures, double standards (Albury, 2015; Miguel, 2016), and shaming (Burns, 2015) about their digitally mediated photographic practices within post-feminist culture (Shields...
Discursive Regulation of Pregnancy

Pregnancy is simultaneously one of the most embodied of human experiences and one of the most discursively regulated. The disciplinary power of discourse (Foucault, 1977/1995) lies in producing particular types of knowledges and making specific kinds of subjectivities socially viable. The process of moral regulation through discourse makes “ontological and epistemological premises of a particular and historical form of social order” (Corrigan & Sayer, 1985, p. 4) natural. Discourse of ideal pregnancy must be understood as situated moral constructs (Malarca & Boulton, 2012), which police women’s maternal experiences, expressions, and responsibilities. Such discourses offer “a limited range of pre-packaged maternal identities to strive to emulate” (Willmott, 2013, p. 42). Those identities are racialized and classed. Working-class and Black mothers are often placed outside of the hegemonic ideal of White, middle-class motherhood, which makes it systematically more difficult for them to attain those pre-packaged identities (Allen, Mendick, Harvey, & Ahmad, 2015). When women do not adhere to these ideals, they risk the punitive label of “bad mothering” (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky, 1998). This label too can carry a double burden for some women based on their race or class (cf. “chav mum” [Tyler, 2008], “welfare queen” [Hancock, 2004]).

Jordan (1993, p. 152) argues that some of the competing and complimentary discourses of childbirth carry more weight than others, either because they explain the world better for the purposes at hand or because they are associated with a stronger power base, and often for both reasons. She calls these sets of discourses “authoritative knowledges.” Authoritative knowledges are built from multiple knowledges present in a social situation rather than single forms of understanding (Jordan, 1992). Arguably, one of the more powerful authoritative knowledges of motherhood since the turn of the century has been that of “intensive mothering.” It has been described as “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays, 1998, p. 8). As an ideal, the discourse of intensive mothering leads to constant surveillance, where “everyone watches us, we watch ourselves, and other mothers, and we watch ourselves watching ourselves” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 5). Like childbirth and mothering, there are multiple discourses pertaining to pregnancy. Nonetheless, as feminist scholarship suggests, and as this article further demonstrates, the authoritative knowledges of what we call “intensive pregnancy” can combine to regulate expecting mothers’ behaviors and, perhaps, subjectivities in rather narrow ways.

Women “do pregnancy” as they (a) learn to be pregnant by seeking information and taking advice, (b) master routines of self-care to guarantee the health of the fetus, and (c) constantly perform pregnancy to ensure that others acknowledge it (Neiterman, 2012). Women thus do pregnancy in an environment that judges them as doing it right or wrong. These judgments are seen in at least five discourses that feminist scholarship has identified as regulating pregnancy. The “pro-natalist” (Gentile, 2011) discourse of medicalization alienates women from control over their own bodies, placing agency with expert medical opinions (Ehrenreich & English, 1978/2005). This fetus-centric approach reframes and judges the female body merely for its physical and moral qualities as a (potential) container for the baby (Balsamo, 1996). The medicalized discourse is supplemented by a discourse of responsibility that makes individual women solely accountable for producing a healthy child (Marshall & Woollett, 2000). The discourse of responsibility encourages women to adopt an intentional, reflexive, research-driven orientation (Song, West, Lundy, & Smith Dahmen, 2012, p. 777), sifting through the available medical and health information to make best choices for their fetuses. Discourses that portray fitness and dieting as inseparable from women’s everyday lives (Dworkin & Wachs, 2004) increasingly permeate the constructs of successful pregnancy, portraying physical training as necessary for delivery (Nash, 2011). The fit pregnancy discourse is amplified and appropriated by celebrity pregnancy coverage (Breese, 2010; Gow, Lydecker, Lamanna, & Mazzoe, 2012; Nash, 2005), growing more prominent ever since the 1991 Vanity Fair cover of a pregnant Demi Moore. This has birthed a “yummy mummy” discourse (Little, 2013; Nash, 2011) of a sexualized pregnant body that gains minimal weight, is fashionably dressed, and bounces back to pre-baby form quickly. Unsurprisingly, an entire industry has sprung from pregnancy’s heightened visibility, stylization, and sexualization. Buying the right baby items, maternity clothes, cosmetics, and spa-treatments (Marshall & Woollett, 2000; Powell, 2010) offers yet another discourse of being good at pregnancy.

Doing Pregnancy Through Photography

Photography, especially self-photography shared through social media, has particular capacity to discursively represent pregnancy in ways that may uphold or resist dominant moralities. In contrast to many other discursive modes, women’s perspectives have long dominated family photography. Women, in particular mothers, are often sole managers of family photos (Rose, 2003, p. 8) and the spread of digital technologies and social media has made mothers more efficient in taking, archiving, organizing, and sharing snapshots (Rose, 2014), ostensibly intensifying the whole practice.
Family photography can be a type of snapshot photography — technologically and skillfully simple capturing of everyday situations by amateurs (Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011). As a rule, snapshot photography focuses on the leisurely and the celebratory, routinely erasing sadness and hardship (West, 2000; Zimmerman, 1995). One might thus expect pregnancy self-photography to do the same and, in so doing, to reinforce dominant discourses.

Compared to traditional family albums or shoeboxes of analog snapshots, the default mode of photos today is sharing (Van Dijck, 2008). Scholars researching Instagram images specifically have suggested that the tools and the stream-logic of the interface reveal an “interesting, even if idiosyncratic portrait of the person” (Fallon, 2014, p. 59). Instagram images have been interpreted as not only presentations of self but also as ongoing networked conversations, extending the subjectivity of a situation from those present to those not (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015, p. 264). Others have argued that Instagram images provide “instafame” (Marwick, 2015) but only to those, who are capable of portraying desirable lifestyles and hegemonic beauty ideals (Abidin, 2016), rather than those who are subversive. Olszanowski (2014) even claims that Instagram’s ToS and rules reinforce hegemonic ideologies in particularly insidious ways.

**Methods**

This article uses discourse analysis of images, captions, and hashtags in pregnant women’s Instagram accounts to understand the authoritative knowledge(s) of pregnancy they enact or resist. Instagram is an image, and video-sharing, smartphone-based social networking platform launched in 2010 and sold to Facebook for US$1 billion in 2012. By June 2016, Instagram had 500 million active users, 300 million of whom use the app every day (Instagram Blog, 2016). The bulk of images shared on Instagram are simple snapshots of every day things.

We created our corpus of data by conducting regular searches of pregnancy-related hashtags in English and Russian (e.g., #pregnant #babybump #pregnancy expecting #preggers #9months #…weeks #ожидание #беременность #беременная #9мес цев #пузик #животик). We chose to include searches in Russian because the second greatest share of Instagram traffic is from Russia (Statista, 2016), thus Russian language Instagram posts are quite frequent, yet understudied. Concurrently, we were curious about how Russian women’s particular ideas of femininity (see Tiidenberg, 2015b) might diversify the discourses of pregnancy on Instagram.

We collected data through the Instagram Application Program Interface (API) between June and July 2014. Our initial sample included 110 accounts (ca. 45,000 posts) by women who speak Russian and 178 accounts (ca. 90,000 posts) by women who speak English. After an initial coding of the large database, we narrowed the analysis to 15 accounts that exemplified the range of themes that emerged from our initial analysis. Focusing on a small number of accounts in greater depth allowed us to see how the themes fit together and how they evolved over the course of a pregnancy, as well as how these discourses were created and recreated through various elements in a post (photos, captions, and hashtags). Each of the accounts included hundreds of posts made over the course of a couple of months to a couple of years. While posts made during pregnancy were analyzed most closely, we also looked at pre-pregnancy posts for context. We relied on the logic of visual discourse analysis as proposed by Gillian Rose (2001), with the focus on how women construct accounts of the social world through images and accompanying texts (p. 140). Our aim was to maintain the contextual integrity (visual, textual, and hypertextual data are seen as intertextually relational) of our data, thus we analyzed photographs, captions, comments, and hashtags as assemblages of how women “do pregnancy” (Neiterman, 2012) on Instagram.

Our corpus is not pulled from all pregnancy-related accounts on Instagram, only those that were posted to non-private accounts and hashtagged, thus we do not claim to speak for all depictions of pregnancy on Instagram, let alone Instagram. Other pregnant women may have private Instagram accounts or they might have public Instagram accounts and not use hashtags; in both those cases, they would not end up in our sample. Others no doubt posted in languages we did not include. Nonetheless, given both the pervasiveness of disciplinary discourses about pregnancy and previous research showing that Instagrammers tend to mimic hegemonic discourses rather than create resistant alternatives (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015), we argue that these discourses will surely be found elsewhere. It is possible that with other Instagram posts we may have found a wider range of themes but, without public audiences or hashtags that increase visibility, such accounts and images are less likely to become part of authoritative knowledge. Tagging makes content searchable and enters it into the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997; Marwick, 2015), thus it can be argued that merely hashtagging publicly available content is a type of performance in and of itself.

We have chosen not to reference any account URLs or names. As it was not possible to contact the women (Instagram at the time did not have a direct messaging system it has now, nor does it provide account holders email addresses) to seek consent, we undertook the following steps to reduce potential harm and increase our accountability. In order to make ourselves accessible for questions throughout the research process, we set up an Instagram account where the project was outlined and all of the women whose accounts we examined were followed. To further protect these women’s identities, inspired by Annette Markham’s (2012) concept of ethical fabrication, we altered the screen-grabs included here using a sketching app called toonPAINT on iOS (iPhone Operating System). Furthermore, we only reproduce images where the...
women are not recognizable. In other cases, only captions and hashtags are reproduced. Baby names referenced in captions have been substituted with “Baby,” other people’s account names have been substituted with references to relationships between account owners and the researched woman (e.g., @daddy, @auntie, @friend). When last names were used, we substituted them for Smith (e.g., #babysmith).

**Analyzed Accounts**

Most of the women in our full sample were seemingly partnered, middle class, and healthy, something previous work has shown to be important in the moral discourses regulating pregnancy. Most Instagrammers in our corpus seemed to be White. There were few women of color among the English-speaking accounts. The Russian-speaking accounts included people based in both Russia and ex-Soviet countries. Despite the apparent socio-demographic similarities among the people whose posts we studied, their lifestyles and ways of performing on Instagram were relatively varied.

Our analyses of these and the other women’s accounts in the sample showed that they “do pregnancy” in ways consistent with Neiterman’s (2012) framework. Their images, captions, hashtags and responses to comments indicate that they are responsibly learning how to be pregnant, seeking out information, taking advice, mastering routines of self-discipline and, of course, performing all of that in ways that invites acknowledgement by regularly posting images on Instagram. In the remainder of this article, we argue that the dominant discourses we have identified in the literature review come together in three inter-related and non-exclusive pregnancy discourses to form the authoritative knowledge of contemporary pregnancy. Women may—and often do—draw on all three, sometimes in the same post. Doing pregnancy on Instagram demonstrates and constructs an authoritative knowledge of learning it, buying it, and working it.

**Doing Pregnancy on Instagram**

*Learn It*

Learning and mastering pregnancy on Instagram brings together discourses of medicalization, responsibility, and fitness/diet. Medicalization begins with the first pregnancy post, which, more times than not, is of a sonogram image. During the initial stages, where there is no rounded belly to show, sonogram images are the most rhetorically persuasive way to perform pregnancy, allowing the mother-to-be to start as early as 8–12 weeks (Seko & Tiidenberg, 2016). Sonogram images are routinely referred to as pictures of the baby or the baby’s selfies, attributing personalities and agency to the unborn child. The way many sonogram images are captioned demonstrates that the woman has mastered the medical vocabulary of week-based time-telling, ounce-based weight measurements, and percentiles of pregnancy:

Caption to a sonogram image: Baby doc update: hoorahh for third trimester! WOW! Little man is 2 lbs 11 Oz! In the 54% scale. Getting big! Yaay. He loves his toes. Saw some hair on the ultrasound. Just a few little hairs on the back of his head lol! Heart beat 135. Glucose test results 87 (has to be under 130) we are perfect! I’m just uncomfortable with the weight on my front, I’m really feeling it but dealing. =) #pregnancy #love #baby #july2014 @daddy #itsaboy

However, captions often infuse this sterile discourse with emotion and cuteness. The fetus is constructed as having person-like traits (“he loves his toes!”) and the expectant-mother as loving and excited to meet her child.

The women whose accounts we studied supplement medical experts and technologies in learning how to prepare and care for their babies, actively educating themselves to medicalize their pregnancies and discursive representations. In the caption to Figure 1, we see an impressive level of detailed knowledge in terms of what kinds of supplements and vitamins a raw-food vegetarian should take when pregnant. The comments indicate that the woman’s expertise doesn’t go unnoticed by her followers, she is both commanded for her dedication as well as asked for further advice or information.

To make their responsibility and the learning process visible, women regularly post images of books, magazines, and screen-grabs of their pregnancy apps. The intertextual work of hashtags, caption, and images (see caption below) allows showing the educational effort and emphasizing the learner identity of the mother-to-be:

Caption to an image of a pregnant woman with five pregnancy magazines in her lap, visually burying her under her reading material: Getting our read on #thebump #meandbaby #pregnancyandnewborn #magazines #love #parenting #babybump #babyboy #summerbaby #read #bookworm #relax

Mentions of fitness/diet are framed through the perspective of fetal health and the maternal body as a container that must be kept healthy to deliver a healthy child. In this, we see one of the few discourses that allows women to express any negative affect as they document the ways they sacrifice themselves for their fetuses’ well being. The following caption shows the mother’s effort in forcing herself to eat food that to her, is gross and looks like cockroaches:

Caption to an image of a bowl of dried dates: eating 6 dates a day in last month of pregnancy is supposed to reduce the need for induction and reduce labor by up to 7 hours . . . totally worth it but these things look like dead cockroaches!! #dates #augmentation #induction #labor #fitpregnancy #healthypregnancy #cockroach #gross
We did not see any outright rejections of the medicalization of pregnancy within the Learn It discourse, but we did see interesting appropriations and remixes, especially on the Instagram accounts of women whose self-presentations emphasized religion and spirituality. These women still demonstrate their sensed responsibility to draw on outside expertise to host and deliver a healthy baby, but draw on non-medical experts in so doing. The following caption accompanied a screen grab of the woman’s phone, where a paragraph of scripture was highlighted. The religious text has been framed as a birthing-technique; taking an element from the medicalized discourse and remixing it with a non-medical practice:

Every woman has a different birth plan . . . but mine was just one hearing and reading this scripture through labour . . . these were words of encouragement from God himself #labour #bible #Godlovesme #quotingscriptures!!!#Isaiah66:8-10

Instead of stating only that she prayed during birth, this woman shows her awareness that responsible pregnant women have birth plans (a legacy of medicalized discourse) and positions scripture as hers. Given the dominance of the medicalized discourse (Ehrenreich & English, 1978/2005) in female reproductive life, this can be interpreted as an attempt to increase the legitimacy of her preferred (non-medical) practice during birth, thus aligning the way she does pregnancy with the widely accepted, moral way, while still making it relevant for her personally.

While non-medicalized pregnancies and births are uncommon in media and popular culture (Laboring Under An Illusion: Mass Media Childbirth vs The Real Thing, 2011), opting out of sonogram images and/or choosing home-birth have become more common within a minor but persistent discourse of natural pregnancy (cf. mamanatural.com). Our sample makes it impossible for us to comment on the (however rare) lack of sonogram images, but we did see some women planning home births. Similarly to the scripture as birth plan example above, home-birth was framed via expert knowledge. Instead of midwives, doctors, pamphlets, magazines, or pregnancy apps, some of the posts we studied drew on expertise gleaned from gurus, teachers, friends, magical objects, or spiritual practices. In both cases, however, we see women relying on outside expertise accepted in their social networks as adequate, and more importantly for discursive formation, making their reliance obvious in their Instagram performances. Thus, we argue that the “learn it” discourse speaks of an internalized sense of responsibility (Marshall & Woollett, 2000), and an acceptance of the need to do additional, extensive work to self-educate, relying on a set of expert knowledge (usually, but not always, medical) that will be accepted in the woman’s social circle.

Figure 1. Image of dietary supplements.
Buy It

Consumption and demonstrations of consumer-expertise permeated our corpus. The discourse of buying it demonstrates women’s ability to buy and consume correctly (often demonstrating medicalization), their honoring of the rituals of consumerist pregnancy, and rhetorically framing purchasing and consumption as indications of love and a route to an even-more joyful pregnancy. Comments left on the images confirm these interpretations by providing encouragement to buy more things and offering compliments for well-made choices.

These women undoubtedly inhabit capitalist times and spaces. We can’t really step outside of the consumerism. In our current brand-centric culture, consuming gives us a way to belong, and a way to experience the world (Banet-Weiser, 2012). It is increasingly hard to situate ourselves without displays of consumption (Miles, 1998). Nonetheless, Instagram itself, with its visual economy, has been shown (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015) to be particularly suitable for conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899). The current market, after all, “revolves around the image” as “consumers consume visions of a good life.” (Schroeder, 2002, p. 43).

Images of the spoils from pregnancy-related shopping trips are very common (a stack of onsies, baby sneakers, strollers, but also designer diaper bags, etc.). These are paired with captions that hashtag brand names (#adidas, #silvercross), which we interpret as a rhetorical device of conspicuous consumption. But women also create mash-up hashtags by combining baby- and consumption-related tags. These discursively construct consumers in-utero, for example, #нашемумальчику (“for our babyboy” in Russian) #spoiledalready, #forprincess.

Additionally, women accompany images of baby items with tags and captions of positive emotions—joy, contentment, and delight—over having acquired specific items (“Пришла наша коляска! Это дикий нереальный восторг!” Our buggy arrived, I am wildly, surreally excited!). More importantly, purchasing baby items is framed as an indication of the future mothers’ limitless love for the fetus. Women add captions saying, “I love you so much,” “anything for my baby,” or “can’t wait to meet you” to the images of consumer items. Excess is celebrated rather than frowned upon. This seems to counter the widespread austerity ideology with its “new thrift” discourse that targets mothers by romanticizing “happy gendered restraint” of a housewife (Jensen, 2013, p. 5). While in our corpus consumption was blatantly conspicuous, it was explicitly positioned in the service of the unborn child’s needs (as opposed to the mother’s wants) and legitimizing through demonstrations of expert knowledge and responsibility. Acquiring and setting up the right baby items long in advance is framed as evidence of being well prepared (“we have set up the crib/room/clothes—the baby may now come,”) and as if buying a lot of stuff were a prerequisite for delivering a baby. In Figure 2, we see

Figure 2. Image of a freshly set up crib, with pink and pastel green bedding.
purposeful combination of images, hashtags, and captions to show how prepared the future mother is (setting up the room in advance), how knowledgeable she is (no stuffed animals after the baby is born), while still making references to some of her own identity statements (the hashtags #fitmom and #fitpregnancy have nothing to do with this particular image). The emphasis on pink, cuteness, and make-up emoji in the post and the comments also hypergenders the unborn consumer.

Showcasing consumerism also allows the expecting mothers to include significant others in the performances of pregnancy. Expecting fathers are portrayed as buying or assembling items, thus manifesting their suitability for the impending role-change. Relatives and friends gift items (Figure 3), which are then photographed and shared on Instagram, further showing that the pregnant woman has a suitable support-network of people, who choose to and are able to buy things.

Images from baby showers (Figure 4) are perhaps the most spectacular expressions of the “buy it” discourse, showcasing the communal buy-in that the discourse of buying has.

Baby showers are particularly diligently recorded in English-speaking accounts. On Instagram, baby showers become a ritual celebration of the baby’s existence as a gendered and classed person, one who will become a gendered and classed consumer. #itsagirl was used with Figure 4 and all of the decorations were pink. Economic status is emphasized through pairing images of mountains of gifts with mentions of feeling blessed at having amassed such a large amount of gifts and using “spoiled” as an affirmative descriptor for the unborn child.

As with the discourse of “learn it,” we didn’t see outright rejection of the consumerist aspects of pregnancy, but we did find some alternative ways of practicing consumption, suggesting how these practices may remain ideals even for those without the class status that would enable them to buy generously for the unborn. We found examples of wish-listing (posting images from adverts with desiring captions or inquiring for information where to find items) and thrifting. Yet, even in these, the surrounding elements (expertise, rituals, framing as evidence of care) remained the same.

Buying secondhand is widely accepted as a socially responsible form of consumerism and romanticized via a “new thrift” rhetoric (Jensen, 2013). However, as seen in the caption for Figure 5 (a big pile of baby clothes on the floor), it too relies on the consumerist assumption that a baby needs a great deal of consumer items. When we situate these posts in the rest of that user’s Instagram feed, the supremacy of the consumerist discourse becomes even clearer. Those who buy secondhand still buy new items and get new items as gifts from their social network. It is also possible that the class status of the women in our corpus shielded them from the austerity ideology’s shaming via thrift rhetoric (Jensen, 2013), or that Instagram as a platform is utilized disproportionately for
demonstrations of middle-class lifestyle (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015).

**Work It**

The third discourse we saw in our analysis of pregnant women’s Instagram performance relies on “yummy mummy” themes. This discourse emphasizes the mothers-to-be continuing sexiness despite her discomfort and the temporary disruption of her physical form (Littler, 2013; Nash, 2005; Tyler, 2011). The most popular way of showing that the pregnant woman is “working it” is to post selfies that demonstrate outfits and the belly (mirror images from the side), showing that the pregnant woman has not gained excessive weight. These kinds of posts follow Instagram’s informal #OOTD genre rules by listing all of the brands, but as with the “learn it” discourse—mixing in references to the physical sacrifice, discomfort, and mentions of love and expectation. It is telling, that the widely used #OOTD hashtag/genre gets rebranded into #stylethebump. “Style the bump” is a term often used in the “celebrity bump watch” (Gentile, 2011) in magazines and celebrity blogs. Just as #OOTD #stylethebump is all about appearances, but rhetorically positions the “bump” as the beneficiary of the styling. This reinforces the interpretation made in the previous section that buying is legitimized through being positioned as meeting the baby’s needs. As evident in the following caption from a Russian-speaking woman’s account, the #stylethebump hashtag is widespread enough to move across language communities:

Caption to an image of a pregnant woman showing her outfit while cupping her belly: #pregnancy #pregnancyphoto #stylethebump #babybump #maternity #mothersinprotest #fashionpregnancy #fashionmom #беременная (pregnant) #будуамамой (I will be a mom) #9месяцев (9 months) #вождениичуда (awaiting a miracle) #пузожитель (belly inhabitant) #32недели (32 weeks)

Like the “learn it” discourse, the “work it” discourse uses themes of dieting and exercise, but frames them as less about the health of the fetus than about limiting weight gain and staying toned. Women show themselves striving for a palatable appearance within a visual economy that rewards sexualized images of women (Gill, 2008). Thus, the “work it” discourse in particular can be interpreted as one where women embody the post-feminist subjecthood (Gill, 2007; Shields Dobson, 2015) that prioritizes the sexualized female body over the maternal female body familiar in medicalized discourse.

However, as in the other discourses discussed in this article, we saw many mentions of love for the unborn child in appearance-related posts (Figure 6). Women supplement mentions of their desire to have their sexy, pre-baby figure back with assurances of love for the fetus. This points to a
Figure 5. Image of a pile of baby clothes on the floor.

Figure 6. A collage image of bump-selfies in gym clothes.
multiplicity of pressures from competing discourses that morally regulate pregnancy and women’s wider gendered performances. The medical discourse mandates women put the fetus first, while the sexualized discourse demands abs and forbids women from gaining too much weight, even during pregnancy. Without wanting to diminish the love pregnant women feel for their unborn babies, these persistent declarations throughout various, seemingly random and non-love-related posts may function rhetorically to ease the tensions between the discourses and blend them into something livable.

What If You Can’t?

These three discourses presume that women are in positions to achieve the goals they stress—the ability to gain external expertise, to make purchases, and to remain sexy. Not all women are equally able to do these things. Critical feminist scholars have argued that when women’s pregnancies are in concord with the reigning discourses, they gain social capital and self-worth, while pregnancies that do not conform to the narrow ideals draw shame through cautionary tales of welfare-queens, single mothers, pregnancy diabetes, and teen-mothers (Pillow, 2006; Roberts, 1997). There are a few women in our sample who did not have the privilege and the resources to “do pregnancy,” by “learning it,” “buying it,” and “working it” or who simply didn’t fit the categories of partnered and healthy. Considering how few alternative discourses we saw among the women who seemed to have social, cultural, corporeal, and economic capital, it is unsurprising that single women, teenage women, women with mental health issues, recovering drug addicts or alcoholics did not question the validity of these discourses, let alone offer powerful alternatives to them. Rather, what we saw could be interpreted as an attempt to rhetorically compensate for inability to fully conform. Women, who are unable to buy expensive baby items or fit into small dresses would, for example, seem to post more sonogram images, declarations of love, motivational posters, and poetry. These women also emphasize inexpensive or immaterial aspects of learning pregnancy, for example, a young woman preparing to become a single mother posted an image of a CD cover for a classical music compilation. Her addition of the hashtags regard- with posts that suggested alternative discourses, but over the course of their pregnancies, increasingly modeled the moral discourses we have been discussing. The following captions are from selfies by a woman whose pre-pregnancy Instagram account was devoted to pro-ana and radical weight loss. When she first found out about her pregnancy, she often posted about her anxiety regarding weight gain and even her fears of losing her pro-ana followers. Her early-pregnancy demonstrations of medicalization and responsibility are fused with expressions of negative affect and self-hatred:

Caption to a mirror selfie of the woman’s back: I gained 3 pounds but I gotta eat for the baby, my anxiety is so high right now, but my first doctor’s appointment is the 15th so I wanna lose like 8 pounds by then . . . I just wanna be skinny. On top of it the babydaddy is being an ass, he says he needs more time . . . work is killing me im so tired and sick all the time . . . I miss my fasting and losing weight im gunna get so fat!!! #girlswithtattoos #girlswithcurves #iwantbones #ana #mia #eatingdisorders #fat #pregnant #mommytobe #hatemysel #unhappy

In the later posts, we see her framing her pregnancy quite differently. After 3 months, she posted a classical sideways pregnancy-selfie that makes the growth of the belly evident. No longer filled with negativity—or at least no longer willing to express such feelings on Instagram—she captioned it with the following:

My little alien is growing and my belly getting big. girl or boy?? #girlswithpiercings #girlswithtattoos #babystICK #babies #love #happy #mommytobe #pregnant #pregnancy #16weeks

Similar to the examples discussed in the “learn it” discourse, we see this woman using the medicalized time-telling in weeks (#16weeks) and filling the caption with hashtags about positive emotion (#love #happy). Only references to tattoos and piercings remain from her previous subcultural identification hashtags. References to pro-ana (#iwantbones #ana #mia #eatingdisorders #fat) are gone, as are hashtags that indicate unhappiness (#hatemysel #unhappy). We hope we can read this as an improvement in her happiness, but it’s also possible that her later Instagram posts reflect the disciplinary power of the pregnancy discourses in action. A woman hoping to inhabit a socially viable subjectivity during pregnancy may have to accept a discursively “appropriate” way of doing pregnancy.

Conclusion

Pregnancy today is highly visible (Nash, 2005), intensely surveilled (Douglas & Michaels, 2004), marketed as a consumer identity (Tyler, 2011), and feverishly stalked in its celebrity manifestations (Nash, 2005; Willmott, 2013). This propagates specific, narrow, overlapping visions of what a “normal” pregnancy or a “normal” pregnant woman should feel, look, and act like. We have argued that “learn it,” “buy
it,” and “work it” combine to form the current “authoritative knowledge” (Jordan, 1992, 1993) of pregnancy as performed on Instagram.

The “learn it” discourse operates with an internalized sense of responsibility (Marshall & Woollett, 2000), intense self-education, and reliance on a lifestyle-specific set of expert knowledge (e.g., medical or new age). The “buy it” discourse is comprised of demonstrations of consumerist expertise; consumerist rituals, which construct new consumers in-utero; and legitimizes the above through the rhetoric of love. The “work it” discourse relies on women showcasing their ability to retain a sexualized female body even while pregnant, and, like the “buy it” discourse, increases its moral power by infusing what could, otherwise, be considered vanity, with maternal love.

These discourses combine and remix the dominant perceptions of pregnancy (i.e., the medicalized body, the sexualized body, the internalized responsibility) that decades of critical feminist and media research have described. They do so in ways that retain said discourses’ power to morally regulate, but allow women to incorporate them in their lifestyles (vegetarian, new age), thus embodying and perhaps to an extent reworking the dominant discourses of neoliberalism, postfeminism, and consumerism (Evans & Riley, 2015). These discourses complement each other well; their moral persuasiveness seems to increase when combined. Inspired by the similarities of our three discourses with the “intensive mothering” authoritative knowledge, which has dominated the moral regulation of mothering since the turn of the century and is “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays, 1998, p. 8), we call the authoritative knowledge we identify in this article “intensive pregnancy.”

The women we observed, both in our small sample and the larger corpus from which their accounts were drawn, rarely depart from this “intensive pregnancy” authoritative knowledge. While rhetorically persuasive alternative discourses for mothering like #slummmymummy⁸ exist both on Instagram and off, a pregnancy-specific analog did not emerge from our corpus. Furthermore, those less able to “learn it,” “buy it,” and/or “work it” regularly posted compensatory posts. As previous work on Instagram by Marwick (2015), Abidin (2016), and Tiidenberg (2015b) suggests, the counter-discursive potential of social media remains largely unused by pregnant women on Instagram. Instead, they seem to use the available tools to demonstrate that they are disciplined and do pregnancy right. Through their photos, hashtags, and captions, pregnant women both perform their pregnancies and extend the subjectivity (Gibbs et al., 2015) of “doing pregnancy” to other expectant mothers as well as people who may not recognize the effort it takes. Images of vitamins, consumer items, and body demonstrate how the material realities of women’s lives are mobilized as forms of discourse. Making this effort visible is an important part of “intensive pregnancy” because it simultaneously provides proof of conformity and strengthens the system of surveillance that feeds it. The way “learn it,” “buy it,” and “work it” are used, and the way they combine into an authoritative knowledge of “intensive pregnancy,” show that in a truly Foucaultian (1977/1995) way, they have become internalized as a language for women to speak about and visualize their own pregnancy. The laudatory comments we see, even in the examples included, demonstrate the rewards they receive for doing pregnancy “right.”

In closing, we want to speculate on the special role shared photography on social media sites such as Instagram may serve in fostering intensive pregnancy. Making direct claims of goodness in words (verbally or in writing) is widely considered bragging or boasting in Western cultures. People are well versed in creating nuanced, polysemic messages to get around this—a skill that some authors (boyd & Marwick, 2011) link with social media use in particular. Images are particularly polysemic and seem to become increasingly important in social media interactions. Perhaps, these images make claims of moral goodness more palatable for those viewing them. Images, skillfully combined with captions and the metacommunication (Daer, Hoffman, & Goodman, 2014) of hashtags, seem to have particular rhetorical force, which is amplified through the intertextuality between the three layers. The discursive power of hashtags, images, and captions in combination deserves further research, both to illuminate the moral regulation of pregnancy and to better understand how social media practices may influence and enforce discursive hegemonies. The latter, in turn, need to be looked at across more languages and with attention to class, race, and other categories that have a long history of overburdening people’s subjectivities.

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Notes
1. The article comes out of a larger project conducted during a research internship that Katrin Tiidenberg did with Nancy Baym at Microsoft Research New England’s Social Media Collective.
2. This article does not aim to compare Russian-speaking and English-speaking accounts, but it might be helpful to mention here that based on the initial descriptive coding and analytical memos of all of the accounts, the performances were largely similar. The one noticeably differing pattern in Russian-speaking women’s accounts was that these tended to rely more heavily on a heteronormative ideology of hyperfemininity that emphasizes women’s attractiveness and sexual appeal. This and its possible connection to Russia’s historical and
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