

Managing authenticity in a kidfluencers' world: a qualitative study with kidfluencers and their parents

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Child's privacy versus mother's fame: Unravelling the biased decision-making process of momfluencers to portray their children online

Abstract

Many privacy concerns are related to influencer sharenting, or the practice of influencers sharing content about their children on social media. This study uncovers how momfluencers (i.e., mothers who collected a large following on their social media channels by sharing insights of their motherhood experiences) reflect on these privacy concerns and examines how these concerns rationally and/or biasedly impact their sharenting behaviour. By conducting in-depth interviews with 20 Flemish momfluencers on Instagram, this study reveals that, while they are concerned about their child(ren)'s privacy and take some privacy-related measures to protect it, cognitive biases (unconsciously) reduce their risk perceptions. As such, privacy risks are perceived as relatively abstract and distant because the majority of them have not (yet) personally experienced them. Additionally, a privacy-openness paradox occurs in which mothers tend to lose the explicit and immediate benefits of influencer sharenting when protecting their child(ren)'s privacy, further stimulating them to disclose personal details. These results show that children derive little to no benefits from their mothers' influencer activities, yet are the ones carrying the potential privacy risks.

Keywords: sharenting; influencer marketing; privacy; children; mothers; Instagram

Wordcount: 7.882

Introduction

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube allow parents to share and exchange experiences of parenting and father- or motherhood (i.e., sharenting) (Walrave et al., 2022). For instance, a recent study among 1,000 US parents shows that 77% share content (photos and videos) of their children on their social media profiles (Security.org, 2021).

Sharenting has opened up huge opportunities for mothers in particular, as some balance their work-life by participating in *influencer sharenting* (Jorge et al., 2021). More specifically,

these mothers, also referred to as *momfluencers*, have succeeded in attracting a large group of followers on their social media channels by sharing authentic insights of their personal life.

As such, their reach and impact give them many opportunities to work together with commercial partners, and thus, commercialise their family lives (Abidin, 2015).

Prior research on regular social media users' sharenting practices not only highlights the benefits for parents of depicting their child on social media, such as collecting memories and exchanging parental advice (Latipah et al., 2020; Verswijvel et al., 2019), but also emphasizes the numerous privacy-related risks. As such, the child's depiction on social media can be misused by paedophiles or commercial parties, and a digital footprint is created that might not be consistent with the child's actual and/or future identity (Autenrieth, 2018; Jorge et al., 2022; Nottingham, 2019). Remarkably, existing research revealed that momfluencers are concerned about their child's privacy, yet, continue to depict them online (Archer, 2019a; Jorge et al., 2021). This paradoxical behaviour is referred to as the *privacy paradox by proxy* which assumes a dichotomy between an individual's privacy attitudes and actual behaviour when it comes to disclosing personal details about others (Ní Bhroin et al., 2022). On the one hand, this can be explained from a rational perspective which involves a rational, analytical, and conscious risk-benefit calculation (e.g., Privacy Calculus Theory, where parents reason that the benefits of sharenting outweigh the risks; Culnan and Armstrong, 1998). On the other hand, it can be explained by a biased risk-benefit calculation as, due to bounded rationality and time constraints, individuals are often more prompt to rely on certain biases and heuristics which may eventually lead to parents unconsciously minimizing the risks associated with sharenting (e.g., immediate gratification). Nevertheless, although existing research has already shown that the experience of a privacy paradox by proxy is evident for momfluencers, it remains unclear if such paradoxical behaviour can be explained by rather rational or biased decision-making (i.e., Barth & De Jong, 2017).

Accordingly, this study aims to gain further insights into the privacy paradox experienced by momfluencers through investigating what role rational and/or biased decision-making process play in momfluencers' sharenting practices. This aim will be tackled by conducting in-depth interviews among 20 Flemish momfluencers (mother influencers of children aged 3 months – 18 years) and using insights of theories concerning rational and biased decision making as a theoretical framework. This paper is first to examine momfluencers' reasoning behind their paradoxical behavior. The findings are crucial as they give rise to recommendations to better protect children's privacy.

Literature review

Influencer sharenting and sharenting labour

Across cultures, sharenting has become a norm within the always-online civilization (Abidin, 2015; Esfandiari & Yao, 2022; Verswijvel et al., 2019). The work that parents put into sharenting to receive monetary gain, is referred to as *sharenting labour* (Campana et al., 2020) and is most common for influencers that monetize their family lives by sharing content about parenthood for a large number of followers (i.e., *influencer sharenting*). Mothers that participate in influencer sharenting are referred to as *momfluencers* and differ greatly from regular celebrities as they are perceived as more authentic, ordinary, and accessible (Abidin, 2017). The disclosure of personal information about their children contributes to the establishment of an authentic online identity, making their opinions appear more truthful than those of brands and traditional celebrities (Abidin, 2017; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Accordingly, momfluencers are often approached by companies to advertise (child-related) products or services in exchange for a compensation (i.e., a financial or material remuneration, or retrieving access to exclusive events) (Abidin, 2017). However, the extensive use of children within (commercialized) online content has led to a number of

ethical considerations (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

Ethical dilemmas in a momfluencer's world

Prior research on regular sharenting emphasises that parents have many motives to participate in sharenting. Examples include wanting to show others how proud they are of their children, coping with the transition to motherhood, informing and keeping others up-to-date about their child's personal life, and collecting memories and exchanging parental advice (Esfandiari & Yao, 2022; Jorge et al., 2021; Verswijvel et al., 2019). From the momfluencers' point of view, these motives are associated with several benefits. First, one major perceived benefit is the gain of social capital (i.e., social connections and interactions with followers) that momfluencers experience when disclosing information about their family life (Abidin, 2015; Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). To continue gaining social capital and establish a successful influencer status, momfluencers must continuously invest in the creation of an authentic online identity that correlates with their offline identity (Maares et al., 2020). Hence, since becoming a mother is one of the major life events for influencers, children often soon take the center stage in their published content. Besides, influencer sharenting gives momfluencers the opportunity to represent themselves as good parents to a large audience (Holiday et al., 2020). Second, next to social capital, momfluencers are able to retrieve economic capital from their influencer status. Momfluencers financially benefit from their influencer activities as they are able to participate in sharenting labour. This gives them the opportunity to become *mumpreneurs* and engage in '*playbour*' (i.e., a combination of work and play), which allows them to grow their influencer business while spending time with their children (Archer, 2019b; Jorge et al., 2021). Consequently, some momfluencers practice this as their full-time job, making their influencer activities serve as their only source of income.

Despite these benefits, existing research has identified several privacy risks associated with depicting children online. A first potential risk is the digital identity that parents create

for their children. This constructed identity might not be in line with how the child perceives themselves. For instance, a focus group study conducted by Ouvrein and Verswijvel (2019) uncovered a disagreement between the image adolescents (aged 12 to 14) attempt to make online and the content that their parents publish online. Furthermore, through a qualitative content analysis of social media posts, Jorge et al. (2022) revealed that the child's digital identity is not a representation of the child's self, but rather a representation of the extended self of their celebrity parent (and their parent's audience). Similar research by Holiday et al. (2020) aligns with these findings and even suggests that when it comes to regular sharenting, parents would rather represent themselves on Instagram than protect their children's privacy. These practices could lead to disrupted parent-child relationships as the child's desired levels of privacy conflict with the way their parents handle their information (Autenrieth, 2018; Nottingham, 2019). Consequently, parents deny their children the right to create their digital footprints on their own terms (Steinberg, 2016). Moreover, Udenze and Bode (2020) point out that, as children grow up in an environment where sharing personal details in cyber space is perceived as the standard norm, the concept of privacy might erode faster.

A second risk entails that children that are depicted online are vulnerable for criminal misuse, such as digital kidnapping (i.e., strangers stealing minor's photos and pretending to be them) (Nottingham, 2019). Furthermore, scholars have expressed their concerns regarding the commercial misuse of children's information that parents put online. For instance, by conducting two qualitative studies, Fox and Hoy (2019) concluded that mothers share their children's information with brands without questioning the implications that these actions might have in terms of their children's online privacy and safety. The authors also emphasized the risk of others becoming co-owners of parents' content once it is published online. Considering that momfluencers often collaborate with brands and involve their children within their partnerships, these risks are even greater for them. Additionally, research shows

that paedophilia is a main concern that parents have related to their sharenting behaviour (Chalklen & Anderson, 2017). Innocent content published on social media may appear in other contexts for which it was not intended (such as paedophile networks) and make children a potential target of child predators. For instance, according to a study conducted by the Australian government's Safety Commission, approximately half of the photos shared on paedophile websites were taken from social media websites (Richards, 2015). Indeed, in-depth interviews with kidfluencers (i.e., influencers under the age of 13) and their parents showed that online harassment by elderly men is a common practice (Van den Abeele et al., 2022).

A privacy paradox by proxy occurs as in-depth interviews with mombloggers revealed that momfluencers struggle with their children's privacy rights, yet, still continue to depict them online (Archer, 2019a). Chalklen and Anderson (2017) hereby argued that parents continuously need to balance their children's right for privacy and the benefits of openness (e.g., receiving validation) (i.e., privacy openness paradox). Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2017) underlined these results as their in-depth interviews revealed that mombloggers find difficulties in balancing their need to represent their identities as parents, and protect their children's privacy. Thus, while parents are expected to gatekeep their child's privacy, they may, paradoxically, be the ones infringing it through sharenting and, thus, preferencing their own benefits over their children's privacy risks (Nottingham, 2019).

Notably, some parents tend to use certain anti-sharenting or cost-mitigating strategies as they use certain (photo) practices that enable them to display their children while retaining some anonymity (Archer, 2019b; Autenrieth, 2018). Moreover, Esfandiari and Yao (2022) revealed, through netnography and semi-structured interviews, that Iranian parents tend to more continuously consider what (not) to share online and with whom they share this information (i.e., parental disclosure management, Ammari et al., 2015). However, the

question remains *why* momfluencers still continue sharing content about their children online, while acknowledging its risks.

Theoretical Framework

Several academic researchers have attempted to find an explanation for the privacy paradox (Barth & De Jong, 2017; Kokolakis, 2017). A systematic literature review by Barth and De Jong (2017) suggests three decision-making categories that ultimately lead to a privacy paradox. The first one can be excluded within this paper, as it suggests a decision-making process in which little to no risk is assessed (i.e., previous research has shown that momfluencers do highly consider the risks involved with depicting their children online; e.g., Jorge et al. (2021)). This leads to two remaining perspectives: (1) a rational and conscious risk-benefit calculation, and (2) a biased and unconscious risk-benefit calculation perspective (i.e., by using heuristics and cognitive biases). Notably, both perspectives have one thing in common: it contains a calculation between the expected loss of privacy and the potential benefits of disclosure, where benefits are considered more prevalent than costs (Barth & De Jong, 2017). Importantly, existing research regarding sharenting already suggests that parents make such calculation as they weight the benefits of sharenting (such as receiving validation) towards several privacy concerns (such as creating a digital footprint for their children) (Livingstone et al., 2018). As an example, Ní Bhroin et al. (2022) showed that parents considered the social benefits of sharenting more important than the potential risks for both themselves and their children. In contrast, Wagner and Gasche (2018) claimed that parents believed that the potential costs for their children outweigh their own benefits. Nevertheless, existing research has, to our knowledge, never examined to which extent parents, and more specifically momfluencers, rationally or biasedly assess the risks against the benefits of depicting their children online.

Rational decision-making. A well-known rational benefit-risk calculation is based on the Privacy Calculus Theory (Culnan & Armstrong, 1998). Applied to online self-disclosure, this theory postulates that, when the perceived benefits (such as social and economic gains) outweigh the risks (such as privacy infringements), social media users will disclose more personal information online (Barth & De Jong, 2017; Culnan & Armstrong, 1998). This rationality-based theory presupposes that people act in ways that would maximize favourable outcomes and minimize unfavourable ones (Dinev & Hart, 2006). For instance, within this study's context, it would suggest that momfluencers rationally trade-off the benefits (i.e., social and financial capital) and the costs (i.e., losing control over their children's privacy) of their influencer activities.

Biased decision-making. However, research in behavioural economics has shown that individuals mostly do not rely on rational trade-offs due to cognitive biases, time constraints and bounded rationality (i.e., rational decision-making is impossible due to an individual's limited cognitive ability and available time) (Acquisti & Grossklags, 2005). Therefore, one's decision-making process mostly results from irrational thinking. Accordingly, psychological distortions may prevent people who genuinely want to protect their (and others') privacy from doing so (Acquisti, 2004). Put differently, less rational and unconscious biases can influence one's decision-making (Simon, 1982). For instance, Barth and De Jong (2017, p. 1040) argue that there are five different biases that can have an influence on an individual's risk-benefit calculation: (1) *cognitive heuristics* (i.e., relying on simple mental short-cuts due to bounded rationality and limited cognitive involvement; Acquisti (2004)), (2) *under- and/or overestimation of risks and benefits* (i.e., overestimating the likelihood that others will suffer negative outcomes while underestimating their own risk of privacy violation) (e.g., Optimistic Bias; Cho et al. (2010)), (3) *immediate gratification* (i.e., choosing a small benefit in the small run over a larger benefit in the long run; O'Donoghue and Rabin (2000)), (4) *differences*

between judgements of risks and benefits (i.e., adding more value to gains than losses), and (5) *habit* (i.e., perceiving the use of social media as an integrated daily life habit which creates social capital and interconnectedness; Debatin et al. (2009)). A systematic literature review by Gerber et al. (2018) aligned with these results and discussed some other interesting influential factors such as social influence (i.e., the impact of others' privacy behaviour), illusion of control (i.e., the tendency for people to believe that they have more control over their privacy than they actually do), and lack of experience and knowledge. Such biased perspective would mean, within this study's context, that momfluencers do not consciously weight off the benefits against the costs of influencer sharenting, but rather unconsciously rely on biases when making privacy decisions.

Method

In this study, we adopted a constructivist approach to understand the decision-making process that momfluencers rely upon when deciding to portray their children online. Constructivism is a theoretical perspective that emphasizes the role of individuals in actively constructing their own meaning and reality (James & Busher, 2009). In keeping with this perspective, we recognize that knowledge is not a fixed nor objective entity, but rather constructed by one's own experiences. As such, this study draws on guided in-depth interviews.

Sample

We used intensity sampling as we decided to search and select excellent examples of the momfluencer phenomenon (Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019). We, therefore, searched on Instagram (as momfluencers most frequently use this platform; Holiday et al. (2021)) for mothers who (1) had more than 1000 followers, (2) extensively portrayed their children in their content, and (3) had worked with at least one kid's brand. The authors gathered a group of respondents who met these criteria by contacting them through private messages on Instagram. The

snowball method was used as momfluencers contacted other momfluencers to participate. We stopped this sampling procedure the moment we believed that we generated sufficient interesting findings (Rowley, 2012). The current sample has voluntarily chosen to participate and consisted out of 20 momfluencers with children between 3 months and 18 years old (*see Table 1*).

Table 1. Overview of the interviewed momfluencers

Respondent ^a	Gender and age children ^b	Number of followers on Instagram ^b
R1	boy (2) & girl (4)	12.700
R2	boy (3 months) & boy (3 years)	11.100
R3	girl (4) & girl (7)	2.505
R4	boy (2) & boy (4)	5.265
R5	boy (2) & girl (4)	7.058
R6	boy (2) & girl (4)	10.200
R7	girl (3)	11,100
R8	girl (3), girl (3) & boy (10)	12.200
R9	girl (3) & girl (5)	13.300
R10	boy (1)	9.778
R11	boy (10 months) & girl (3)	2.219
R12	girl (3)	11.700
R13	girl (2) & girl (5)	13.200
R14	boy (2) & boy (4)	39.400
R15	girl (10 months) & boy (2)	16.500
R16	boy (3), boy (8) & girl (10)	12.300
R17	boy (4), boy (6), boy (8) & girl (18)	17.000
R18	boy (2), girl (4), boy (8) & boy (10)	7.117
R19	girl (6) & boy (9)	8.375
R20	girl (1), boy (6) & boy (8)	7.367

^aThe ages of the children will be inserted between brackets when referring to quotations

^bAt time of the interview

Procedure and ethical guidelines

The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted between February and March of 2021 through Microsoft Teams as personal contact was still restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and lasted approximately one hour. Each interview was guided by a semi-structured interview guide which started with introductory questions (e.g., social media usage, amount and age of children, content, etc.). Then, the momfluencers' motivations to participate in influencer sharenting were asked, followed by questions regarding what role their children get within their influencer activities. Questions related to the commercial collaborations they carry out on their social profiles were asked afterwards. Lastly, momfluencers were questioned about their attitudes and behaviour with regard to their children's privacy, considering the theoretical framework. However, the purpose of the interview was not to exhaustively cover a predetermined list of questions, but rather facilitate a natural conversation and stimulate an authentic exchange of ideas, insights, and experiences. Therefore, the interview format allowed for a flexible and open-ended exploration of the respondent's perspectives and allowed the researcher to probe deeper into areas of interest. Additionally, during the interviews, the researcher made sure that a comfortable and safe environment for the participant was created and that each respondent felt at ease.

This study follows the ethical guidelines of qualitative research as it has received Ethical approval from the ethical committee of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at Ghent University. Before the start of each interview, we obtained written informed consent of each interviewee. Additionally, we made sure that each participant was at ease by re-explaining the purpose of the interview, informing them whether and how the information will be kept confidential, and underlining their rights with regard to the interview (e.g., the respondent can stop the interview at any time) (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

Analysis

The interviews were all verbatim transcribed and coded by the same researcher. The transcription of the interviews was time-consuming, yet necessary for the researcher to become familiar with the salient points that were made by the participants (Rowley, 2012). The first researcher of this paper used a thematic analysis to analyse the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Concretely, following an inductive and deductive approach, the researcher made several main themes before extensively coding all data using Nvivo11. This procedure facilitates the collocation of data related to these categories and serves as the core of the findings (Rowley, 2012). Following that, in subsequent rounds of coding, the predetermined code scheme was modified by defining more detailed lower-level codes and reviewing certain main codes based in their usefulness and accuracy. The coding was regularly discussed between the involved researchers in order to reduce potential bias in interpretation.

Findings

In order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between momfluencers and their children in the context of social media, it was necessary to start our findings with exploring what role children play within their mothers' influencer content. Afterwards, the extent to which these mothers consider the potential risks and benefits of depicting their children online was examined, and how this consideration may result in paradoxical behaviour. Lastly, our findings sought to elucidate how the outcome of the privacy calculus is not solely determined by rational decision making, as unconscious cognitive biases may affect momfluencers' perceptions of risk.

Children as protagonists in their influencer mothers' social media content

According to our findings, children play a significant role within their influencer mothers' content as they are continually being depicted in photos and videos on the momfluencers' profiles. Consequently, *the [influencer] content varies with the different life stages of the*

children.' R1 (2,4). This implies that the momfluencers' content differs according to the changes in the life of the child (e.g., breastfeeding advice when the child is born is being replaced by picky eating advice for toddlers or lunch box advice for primary school children, etc.). Their children are not aware that they are being depicted online as mothers believed their children are too young to understand the meaning of social media and thus do not intend to inform them about it:

R13 (2, 5): *I do not consciously tell my children that I put photos of our family online. That conversation will come one day, because I do want to be open about it, but [at this moment] I believe that they are still too young.*

As a result, their children's permission was almost never asked before content about them gets published online. Remarkably, momfluencers with 'older' children were more likely to have a conversation with them about their online depiction as they believed that they have more capacities to understand the meaning and impact of social media. However, nor the interviewed momfluencers, nor the coding gave any indication at what age this evolution leads to including the children in this decision-making process.

Most interviewed mothers indicated that they do consider their children's wishes when doing photoshoots with them: *'As soon as they don't want to be photographed, I won't force them. [...] If they say they don't like it or tell me to put my camera away, I will.'* R5 (2,4).

However, at the same time, momfluencers indicated that they often take pictures without their children noticing: *'I put my mobile phone here [R14 shows how] and then I talk to the children while I'm filming. That way they don't realize I'm filming.'* R14 (2,4). Moreover, an additional complexity appears due to commercial collaborations. The momfluencers in our study stated that depicting their children in these commercial posts is often required by brands. Three-quarters of the interviewees mentioned that their children are sometimes unwilling to pose for pictures or videos because *'they do not feel like it'* R5(2,4).

Consequently, creating content for brands can be very stressful and possibly result in parent-

child conflicts: '[When doing collaborations] *I am very stressed, so it happens that I get angry with my children. My husband then says to me: 'It's OK, we know you are stressed but you have to remain calm.*' ' R3(4,7). It, therefore, occurred that the interviewed momfluencers had to convince their children to participate in their influencer activities:

R17 (4,6,8,18): *I tell them: 'Guys, let's do this and get it over with so everyone can be happy. We're going to laugh, we're going to be joyful and your happiness in this picture is going to pay off this weekend.'*

Risk-benefit calculation by momfluencers

Momfluencers frequently consider the drawbacks and benefits of depicting their children online. As expected, analyses revealed that momfluencers experience a privacy paradox by proxy given that, despite their worriedness about their children's privacy, they continue to heavily depict them online.

More specifically, momfluencers within our study claimed that they '*deeply take their child(ren)'s privacy into consideration*' R12 (3) and are very aware of the possible dangers related to influencer sharenting. As such, the interviewed momfluencers in our study mostly mentioned the potential harm that could be done to their children by strangers with bad intentions. This includes the usage of their photos by paedophiles and the (commercial) misuse of their content. Notably, none of the momfluencers have encountered these risks, with exception of one momfluencer whose child had already been a victim of digital kidnapping. In this anecdote, an American (male) stranger claimed to be the interviewee's daughter (i.e., this stranger stole her child's pictures, reposted them online and captioned it with all kinds of invented stories). Despite that most parents did not come across such serious privacy invasions, more than half of the interviewees already had experienced an infringement of their child's privacy by strangers that recognized them in public places '*Strangers sometimes reach out to my children by calling them by their names when we're walking*

through the streets. My children were once asked questions such as 'was it fun swimming yesterday?''' R4 (2, 4). Our findings show that the majority of the interviewed momfluencers only tend to focus on the risk of criminal misuse, while other risks related to their own behaviour (such as the construction of a digital identity, or the impact on the child's future well-being) tend to be forgotten.

When considering their concerns regarding (criminal) misuse, our analyses confirmed that a privacy openness paradox arises: momfluencers want to protect their children's privacy, yet want to enjoy the benefits of openness. As such, our interviews revealed that momfluencers experience several immediate benefits from sharing images of their child(ren). A first important benefit concerns the commercial deals that they were able to close with advertisers because they depict their child. The material or financial compensation they receive in exchange for these sponsorship deals allows those mothers to spoil their child and reduce their family's financial concerns:

R1 (2,4): *Last year, we went away for two weekends and three holidays. We would not be able to do this on our own due to financial constraints. So, my kids receive things and get to go places that would otherwise be impossible to visit without this.*

The choice for a public profile (vs. a private profile that exposes their children less to certain dangers) is also fuelled by this immediate (commercial) benefit as *'if they would like to remain their commercial collaborations, a private profile is not allowed'* R7 (3). In other words, momfluencers would lose this benefit if they decided to protect their children's privacy via a private profile. Next to financial gain, momfluencers claimed that they earn social capital (i.e., receiving social support and maintaining their authenticity) by disclosing their children's information. Sharing their beliefs, advice and parenting style with other parents gives them many opportunities, and might even result in them becoming the perfect example of how to be a good parent:

R15 (10 months, 2): *I definitely use my channel for parental advice, especially when my first child was born. That's the first time you're a mom and there are lots of things you don't know. So, I like to follow other mothers to see what they are doing, and if I really have a problem and I don't know how to deal with it, I'll just ask advice in my stories and I get loads of answers from which I can choose what I think is useful.*

A last-mentioned benefit is the fact that mothers perceive their Instagram as a 'digital diary' R13 (2,5) and a 'personal photo album that, so to speak, could lay on your coffee table' R14 (2,4). It allows momfluencers to easily collect and get an overview of memories.

Rational versus biased decision-making

In relation to the question whether the above-mentioned paradox is based on rational versus biased decision-making, the results of our study revealed that the risk-benefit calculation favours disclosure of personal information due to a maximization of benefits and minimization of the risks involved with the practice. However, the outcome of the privacy calculus appears not be based on conscious and rational decision making as privacy risks were often minimized by certain unconscious biases.

Optimistic bias and lack of experience. Momfluencers within our study appeared to rely on an *optimistic bias* (Cho et al., 2010) as they believed that their own chances to experience a privacy invasion were lower than those of other momfluencers:

R18 (2,4,8,10): *When I hear terrible stories such as children ending up on Russian websites, I think to myself: there are millions of children; why would they choose mine? I avoid nudity within my children's pictures, but however I always wonder: why would they choose my child to kidnap? I believe it [the risk] is all relative.*

Another factor that might influence the parents' privacy behaviour and explain their experienced optimism bias, is the fact that the majority of the interviewees only feared certain consequences, and did not (yet) encountered them.

Immediate gratification. Overall, coding revealed that momfluencers in our study tended to focus more on the present (less rewarding) benefits than the future (greater) benefits than they would be able to acquire (O'Donoghue & Rabin, 2000): '*I hesitate the longer, the more, to make my profile private. I will see how it goes in the future and how I feel about it. At the moment, the positive aspects outweigh the negative.*' R7 (3). This, again, is influenced by the fact that the majority of momfluencers have not experienced actual negative consequences.

Integrated daily life habit. In addition, momfluencers tended to minimize privacy issues because they perceived information disclosure on social media as an *integrated daily life habit* (Debatin et al., 2009). Making pictures and videos was for most of the momfluencers already incorporated as a daily habit and, and as a logical consequence of the birth of their children, their children became the protagonists within these visuals: '*I always shared everything that I though was beautiful and fun. Since the birth of my daughter, that's just her.*' R7 (3).

Social influence. Momfluencers within our study believed that all mothers share pictures of their child(ren) online and that it is a normal part of parenthood: '*As a mom you always say 'I'm not going to be the mother who constantly posts photos of my child everywhere'. But you automatically do, because it's very normal and natural within society.*' R13(2,5). The interviewees acknowledged that this sometimes results in the practice of impression management: '*I want to show off like: 'look what beautiful children I've produced''*' R18(2,4,8,10). Additionally, momfluencers mentioned that their followers expect them to share content about their children. Thus, following the desires of their followers, they might avoid taking certain privacy measures despite having some level of privacy concerns regarding their sharenting practices.

Illusion of control. Coding suggests that the momfluencers within our study had, despite their influencer sharenting practices, the *illusion that they can control* (Langer, 1975) their children's privacy. This is mainly due to the fact that the interviewed momfluencers participate in a certain level of parental disclosure management where they use, as what they refer to as, a certain 'momfilter' in which they believe that they, as mothers, are capable of filtering whether posts are appropriate to publish or not. As such, they use several cost-mitigating strategies when deciding what (not) to disclose about their child. First, almost every momfluencers avoided nudity within their children's pictures or videos. Monitoring, deleting and blocking followers can be seen as a second commonly used strategy in order to avoid the misuse of their content by strangers: *'I keep an overview of who is following me. I also remove a lot of followers. Even though I still have more than 10k, I weekly delete on average 100-200 people.'* R2 (3 months, 3). Third, the majority of the interviewed momfluencers claimed to avoid disclosing certain personal information (e.g., where their children go to kindergarten). Finally, when wanting to disclose information about their family life on their profiles, nearly half of the interviewees claimed that they discuss these posts with their partner beforehand in order to get a second opinion about the appropriateness of the information: *'When in doubt, I always ask my husband: 'should I share this?' in order to protect my children's privacy'* R2 (3 months, 3). Despite these cost-mitigating strategies, the interviewees still share personal details about their children (such as their real name, age, and daily activities) in order to maintain their authenticity and satisfy their follower's wishes (i.e., social influence). Thus, the above-mentioned cost-mitigating strategies can make parents feel as if they are in control of their children's privacy, when in fact this is not the case.

Underestimation of risks. Lastly, coding revealed that momfluencers within our study tended to (unconsciously) downgrade the occurrence of certain privacy risks, and especially, the privacy risks for younger children: *'I don't want to say that a new-born baby has no right*

to privacy, but it doesn't do that much yet, so there's not that much privacy to be violated [...]
R1(2,4).

Conclusion and discussion

By conducting in-depth interviews with 20 Flemish momfluencers, this study is the first to examine momfluencers' reasoning behind their paradoxical behaviour. More specifically, this paper gained new insights into the privacy paradox experienced by momfluencers by investigating whether momfluencers rely on rational and/or biased trade-offs when portraying their child online.

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that children play a significant role within their mothers' (often sponsored) influencer content. Even though momfluencers claim to respect their children's wishes (and protect their privacy as much as possible), the results show that parents are not always able to live up to this goal. First, most children are unaware that they are being depicted online with their photos and/or videos often taken and published without their knowledge/consent. These findings contradict a survey study on sharenting behaviours by Livingstone et al. (2018) among regular social media users, which found that parents who shared more frequently were more likely to obtain their children's consent. A likely explanation here is that, for momfluencers specifically, portraying their child(ren) is crucial to being considered authentic and hence, gain followers and likes (Abidin, 2015). Alternatively, it is plausible that momfluencers within our study value impression management (i.e., being perceived as good parents) more than considering their children's wishes (Archer, 2019a; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Holiday et al., 2020). Still, in line with prior research by Archer (2019a) and Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2017), this differs according to the children's age as momfluencers within our study were more likely to ask permission when they perceived their child as old enough to understand the meaning of social

media. Second, the children's wishes are not always respected as child-parent conflicts frequently occur when the child refuses to cooperate when shooting commercial content.

Despite that the interviews revealed that several privacy infringements might occur; the parents did not perceive these as worrisome. Specifically, momfluencers within our study only focused on the risk of criminal misuse, while other risks such as digital identity construction (e.g., Jorge et al., 2022) and effects on well-being (e.g., Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019; Steinberg, 2016) tend to be forgotten. Consistent with findings from Archer (2019a) and Jorge et al. (2021), our results showed that momfluencers' worrying regarding criminal misuse lead them to experience a privacy paradox: they are concerned about their children's information being misused by strangers, paradoxically, continue sharing images of them online. The in-depth interviews revealed that this behaviour is fuelled by the outcome of the privacy calculus, which favours disclosure of personal information as the immediate benefits (i.e., financial capital, social capital and collecting memories) outweighed the privacy risks.

Importantly, this outcome is not based on conscious and rational decision making. Specifically, momfluencers within our study did not rationally weight of the benefits against the costs of online information disclosure, but (unconsciously) relied on certain biases (i.e., immediate gratification, optimistic bias, integrated daily life habit, social influence and illusion of control) when making their decisions to portray their children online. These (cognitive) biases prevent the momfluencers' desires to preserve their children's privacy from doing so (Acquisti, 2004). Additionally, as conceptualized by Chalklen and Anderson (2017), a privacy-openness paradox occurs in which mothers tend to lose the explicit and immediate benefits (e.g., followers and/or commercial partnerships) of their sharenting labour when protecting their children's privacy, further stimulating them to disclose personal details.

Overall, throughout the interviews, it was evident that, although momfluencers are, to a certain extent, aware of privacy risks associated with influencer sharenting, they minimize

their worrisome by relying on (unconscious) biases. One explanation is that the privacy risks are perceived as relatively abstract and distant (i.e., long-term risks) because the majority of them have not (yet) personally experienced them. Another plausible explanation is the potential lack of digital literacy among momfluencers, as this might disrupt the adoption of online safety behaviours (Barnes & Potter, 2021). Moreover, advanced digital skills are needed to properly adopt certain cost-mitigating strategies. Furthermore, it is plausible that the cultural background of the participants of this study might have affected the interviewed momfluencers' understanding of privacy and the way they cope with it. For instance, although individualistic countries with high uncertainty avoidance (such as Belgium) more often reduce self-disclosure in response to privacy concerns, it is plausible that their individualistic norms might influence their risk-benefit calculation as they are more likely to prioritize their own personal success over the care and well-being of their family members (Trepte et al., 2017).

Limitations and future directions

Some limitations should be acknowledged despite its thorough planning. First, the study's sample did mostly consist out of nano- and micro- influencers. Hence, it is plausible that different results would be obtained with macro- and mega-influencers. Second, this study did not question nor take into account the social economics of the interviewed momfluencers. It is likely that the benefits for momfluencers of low socioeconomic status outweigh the drawbacks, as they gain access to resources and opportunities that they would not have had otherwise. Lastly this study focused solely on the responsibility of momfluencers, ignoring the responsibility of other stakeholders who contribute to the sharenting problem (e.g., brands, government and social media platforms).

Despite these limitations, our results clearly show the need to further research. First, we recommend experimental research that examines the impact of privacy protective

strategies (e.g., those formulated by Autenrieth, 2018) on momfluencers' status (e.g., perceived authenticity, credibility, or likeability). Second, we recommend longitudinal research with momfluencers' children to see if they experience any impact on their mental well-being of these influencer sharenting practices. Given the recency of the phenomenon, not much is known yet with regard to the impact of those extensive privacy disclosures. Thirdly, it is imperative to further investigate the impact of socio-cultural and religious ideologies on the privacy behaviours of influencer parents and to attain a more inclusive and multifaceted comprehension of privacy. Next, we recommend research that discusses policy recommendations and uncovers more deeply the vulnerable position of children within the influencer industry. Parents have a powerful legal position as the current legislative framework does not adequately account for the fact that parents can be the ones that do not follow their children's interests and violate their child's privacy online (Steinberg, 2016). This latter might be especially true for momfluencers, as there occurs a conflict of interest.

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