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

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# Managing authenticity in a kidfluencer's world: A qualitative study with kidfluencers and their parents

Though kidfluencer marketing is becoming more prevalent, research into children as senders of commercial messages is scarce. Considering the roles of parents, followers and commercial partners, this study is the first to conceptualise and explore kidfluencers' authenticity management. 19 in-depth interviews with kidfluencers (aged 7–12 years) and their parents show that kidfluencer profiles are not an authentic representation of the children's true digital selves, but rather a representation of how parents wish to present their children's digital identities. This is achieved by parents balancing their own wishes against those of their children, followers and commercial parties. A privacy (openness) paradox thereby occurs and parents undertake measures in attempt to guard against the potential risks.

## Introduction

Nowadays, many children under 13 years of age not only watch but also participate in creating social media content, leading them into the position of prosumers (Tur-Viñes et al., 2018). For example, Ryan Kaji (10 years old) was only three years old when he asked his mother to put videos of him on YouTube, and has now gathered over 32 million subscribers to his YouTube channel 'Ryan's World'. Although Ryan is an absolute outlier in terms of popularity, children increasingly aspire to become kidfluencers (Rasmussen et al., 2021). Accordingly, these influential children appear on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, giving their followers authentic insights into their personal lives. In their content, commercial brands are often included, with kidfluencers unpacking and playing with new toys, wearing branded outfits and eating food in exchange for material (e.g., they get the promoted toys or clothes) or financial compensation (i.e., kidfluencer marketing) (Alruwaily et al., 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2021).

To obtain a successful influencer status, influencers must actively engage in self-branding, which entails creating a digital identity for their audience through written and visual communication (Ghani & Cambre, 2020; Khamis et al., 2016). Their content must be perceived by their followers as authentic (i.e., represent one's true or core self) and align with their offline identity to attract and maintain likes and followers (Gilani et al., 2019; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). This process of performing authenticity is referred to as authenticity labour and is influenced by the demands and expectations of different parties involved (Maares et al., 2020). Previous studies have primarily examined the influencer-audience (e.g., Gilani et al., 2019) and the influencer-brand relationship (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2018) when exploring authenticity management. In a kidfluencer context, however, a third agent comes into play: their parents (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020). Indeed, young children generally lack the skills to publish and edit quality content, and their social media profiles must be managed by

(one of) their legal guardians (McGinnis, 2022). Therefore, parents likely play a major role in their children's influencer activities and the way their authenticity is managed (Masterson, 2020). Hence, authenticity management in the context of kidfluencers is likely to be even more complex compared to adult influencers.

This study aims to reveal how kidfluencers manage their authenticity, considering the social dynamics with their parents, followers and commercial partners. The study's approach is highly innovative as it breaks away from the focus on content analyses (e.g., Fleming-Milici et al., 2023) and audience perceptions (e.g., Rasmussen et al., 2021) found in previous research. By conducting in-depth interviews with both parents and kidfluencer themselves, this study pioneers in attaining a comprehensive understanding of the production process behind kidfluencer content.

The primary section of this paper provides a theoretical discussion on the influence exerted by these parties on the authenticity management process of kidfluencers, while formulating a clear and comprehensive research question. In the subsequent section of this paper, we elucidate the approach employed to address the objective of this study, namely by conducting in-depth interviews with both kidfluencers and their parents. The findings of this study shed light on the central role that parents, particularly mothers, play in managing the authenticity of kidfluencers. This study concludes that it is evident that parents are engaged in a complex balancing act, considering their own aspirations as well as the expectations of their children, followers, and commercial partners. These findings have significant practical and policy implications, particularly in regard to preventing potential legal and ethical risks.

## Theoretical framework

### *Kidfluencer marketing*

Worldwide, the digital advertising expenditure targeting children exceeds 2.9 billion U.S. dollars, and is expected to increase approximately 22 percent by 2031 (Statista, 2023). Kidfluencers are extremely valuable as brands invest billions of dollars in kidfluencer marketing, recognizing that their primary audience comprises children (Kalan, 2020). Although kidfluencer marketing is rapidly expanding, an accurate assessment of the global kidfluencer population remains a challenging task due to its dynamic nature, variety of platforms and lack of frameworks for tracking kidfluencers. Feller and Burroughs (2022, p. 3) refer to kidfluencers as "a new category of child stars, often of preschool age, on various platforms who leverage their online following to attract lucrative endorsement deals from major brands". Building upon this definition, other researchers emphasize
that the content shared by kidfluencers is child-oriented and highly popular among their peers (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020; Fleming-Milici et al., 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2021). Because of their young age, however, scholars have emphasized that parents are an invaluable party regarding kidfluencer marketing as, due to age restrictions on various social media platforms, they are expected to manage these profiles while safeguarding the child's rights and well-being (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020; Masterson, 2020). Besides, children are legally not allowed to close commercial deals and therefore rely on their parents to negotiate with commercial partners (McGinnis, 2022). Thus, although from an audience perspective you may assume that the profile is shaped by the child itself, in reality, parents actively manage the published content and commercial partnerships (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020; McGinnis, 2022), sometimes even becoming active characters themselves within their children's content creation process (Tur-Viñes et al., 2018). Building upon existing definitions, and for the sake

of this study, this paper defines kidfluencers as social media influencers under the age of 13 years from whom their social media channels are managed by (one of) their parents.

***Authenticity management***

Authenticity labour has gained increasing attention in recent years as a means of cultivating sociocultural capital (i.e., audience engagement and trust) through the performance of authenticity (Maares et al., 2020). Authenticity encompasses the act of displaying intimate and honest information, where individuals behave in alignment with their true selves (Marwick, 2013b). In essence, it is not an objective entity but rather a subjective and personally defined perception that stems from the audience, making it a quality that cannot universally be achieved by all individuals (Maares et al., 2020). Therefore, influencers use it strategically through content and engagement, hoping to manipulate their followers into believing that their online content is genuine and, consequently, establishing a coherent self-brand (Craig & Cunningham, 2017; Faleatua, 2018). The process of influencers creating a seemingly authentic image on social media while maintaining the appearance of an amateur's raw work is referred to as calibrated amateurism (Abidin, 2017b). Altogether, their published content is used as a symbolic marker to express and cultivate a coherent and consistent digital identity across various contexts and roles (Gilani et al., 2019; Marwick, 2013a). The result can contribute to the perceived source credibility and visibility of the content, giving the influencer the potential to convert sociocultural capital into economic capital (i.e., working together with brands) (Maares et al., 2020; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014). As such, not only do brands prefer to work with influencers whose audience engagement is high, it is also believed that the perceived authenticity of an influencer positively impacts advertising outcomes (Pöyry et al., 2019). Considering the context of kidfluencer marketing, this paper argues that the authenticity of kidfluencers is co-dependent on three agents: (1) parents, (2) followers and (3) commercial partners.

***Parents.*** Many parents aspire to attain a popular influencer status for their children, leading them to circumvent social media age requirements by including a disclaimer in their child's profile bio indicating that the account has been created and managed by (one of the) parents (New York Times, 2019). These parents actively shape their children's online presence and are perceived as the responsible party controlling their (influencer) children's online image, privacy settings and financial incomes (McGinnis, 2022). Through a content analysis, Castillo-Abdul et al. (2020), for instance, describe how parents play a significant role in producing, posting, and supervising YouTube videos featuring kidfluencers, thereby establishing and cultivating a personal brand around the child. It remains, however, unclear how much awareness kidfluencers have of themselves as a content creators (Pedersen & Aspevig, 2018). Based on this latter, we argue that a *parental authenticity paradox* may occur: a discrepancy between what the kidfluencer wants to post and what their parent(s) decide to post. Put differently, parents have the authority to decide which content is posted or omitted, thereby fully managing the kidfluencer's authenticity while constructing a digital identity that does not necessarily reflect the child's offline self but rather aligns with the parent's desired representation of their child (and themselves as parents) (Holiday et al., 2020; Jorge et al., 2022). This differs from the practice of regular sharenting (i.e., regular parents sharing online information about their children without seeking monetary gain) as, in contrast to kidfluencer marketing, the main aim for parents is not to establish and cultivate a personal brand for the child (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Consequently, the online identity of a kidfluencer may differ partly or even completely from their offline identity, resulting in the creation of an inauthentic kidfluencer profile (Hu et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2021).

***Followers.*** Wellman et al. (2020) state that influencers rely on the *ethics of authenticity* when making hard decisions. This leads to a decision-making process based on two fundamental beliefs: '(1) being true to one's self, and by extension, one's brand; (2) being

true to one’s audience by providing it with the content it seeks’ (Wellman et al., 2020, p. 69). However, a potential authenticity paradox may arise as parents continuously self-reflect and consider their followers’ wishes, posting content that aligns with what their followers expect (Gilani et al., 2019; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). As such, several researchers have underscored the growing power of followers (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Kozinets et al., 2023). For instance, Gilani et al. (2019) referred to the relationship between followers and influencers as a 'magic mirror,' emphasizing followers' power to shape and control influencer behaviour. Influencers heavily rely on their followers' engagement, manifested through likes, comments, and follows (Abidin, 2017a; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Gilani et al., 2019). These studies point out that the relationship between followers and influencers is bi-directional in a sense that followers play a substantial role in shaping the content creation process. Consequently, influencers often no longer act authentically by posting content they like but instead share popular content to keep their audience satisfied and interested, hereby creating an inauthentic digital identity (Gilani et al., 2019).

Besides, like other influencers, kidfluencers differ from ordinary celebrities, as their audience expects them to disclose personal information about themselves to be perceived as real and authentic and establish a strong personal brand (Abidin, 2017a; Ghani & Cambre, 2020). While disclosing intimate details may lead to increased popularity in terms of likes and followers (Chung et al., 2023), several studies have already outlined the privacy risks associated with sharing online information about children in a kidfluencer context, emphasizing the child’s right for privacy and the vital role parents play in safeguarding their child’s privacy (Hudders et al., 2022; Masterson, 2020; McGinnis, 2022). The tension between preserving authenticity while safeguarding the child’s privacy might result in a *privacy openness paradox* where parents have to balance their child’s need for privacy with the openness that is expected in authenticity management (Chalklen & Anderson, 2017). This

challenge is exemplified in a recent study by Van den Abeele et al. (2023) which reveals that mother influencers find it difficult to protect their child's privacy as this will potentially result in loss of engagement from their audience. The complexity of managing privacy in a kidfluencer context is further amplified as the focus of the profile is solely on the child, and parents may also have a vested (financial) interest in gaining popularity through these profiles (McGinnis, 2022).

***Commercial partners.*** Kidfluencers hold significant power over their predominantly child audience's consumer behaviours, making them an interesting party for commercial brands (Feller & Burroughs, 2022; Rasmussen et al., 2021). Their success is rooted in the authenticity they portray while genuinely playing and enjoying the toys they promote, creating relatable content for their followers without the audience necessarily realizing they are being targeted (Choi, 2023). However, true authenticity in influencer collaborations requires allowing influencers the freedom to express themselves genuinely (Wellman et al., 2020). Borchers (2023) hereby explains that this necessitates marketers to let go of control over the influencer content creation process, which involves risks as influencers might not always align their messaging with the brand's vision. Consequently, marketers employ various strategies to maintain control over influencer content. These techniques include dictating specific scripts, requiring content approval, and using detailed contracts. For example, research by Tur-Viñes et al. (2018) has shown that in videos where kidfluencers discuss brands, they tend to use exaggerated language to create enthusiasm and excitement. These techniques might be at the expense of their authenticity.

Moreover, when fulfilling their commercial partners' expectations, influencers must take into account their followers' perceptions. Commercial content can create the impression among followers that the content is inauthentic and staged for commercial motives (Hunter, 2016). To balance the expectations of followers towards those of commercial partners,

Audrezet et al. (2018) suggests two authenticity management strategies. First, parents must make sure that their child is intrinsically motivated and driven by their own inner passions and desires rather than by commercial outcomes (i.e., *passionate authenticity*) (Audrezet et al., 2018). Although public debates exist on whether or not children are being pressured into influencer activities (Netimperative, 2020), academic research is lacking. Second, parents must make sure that their child gives their honest opinion and properly discloses their posts to uncover persuasive intent (i.e;, *transparent authenticity*) (Audrezet et al., 2018). Taking into account that parents play an active role in negotiating commercial partnerships (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020), it is questionable whether the commercial content truly represents the child's genuine experiences and opinions. Such disclosures are, however, even more important in a kidfluencer context, as the audience (often children) lack abilities to recognize and empower themselves from commercial attempts (Hudders et al., 2016).

Gaining understanding and insights into how kidfluencers navigate authenticity management with the interference of these different agents is crucial, as the outcomes of the authenticity management process can have far-reaching effects on the children themselves. For instance, the interference can result in a disconnection between children's online and offline identities, resulting in negative consequences for the child's (future) well-being, as not being able to function as one's true self is associated with lower psychological health (Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

## Method

This study uses a qualitative exploratory approach to examine how kidfluencers manage their authenticity, considering the social dynamics with their parents, followers and commercial partners. This method was chosen because of its exploratory nature, which allows us to dig deeper into the social and personal world of a respondent (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

With a sample of 19 kidfluencers and 19 parents, a guided in-depth interview method was employed.

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit kidfluencers. By employing this sampling technique, we deliberately searched on different platforms (i.e., Instagram, YouTube and TikTok) for influencers who (1) were younger than 13 years old (i.e., as mentioned on their social media platform), (2) had completed at least one commercial deal with a brand and (3) were active on at least one social media platform. Only parents who managed the kidfluencers' social profiles could participate; in our case, all were mothers. In addition, the sample consisted of eighteen female kidfluencers and one male kidfluencer. The overrepresentation of female participants could be explained by the greater number of female than male influencers active in the influencer industry. The interviewed kidfluencers were between the ages of 7 and 12 years. Thirteen parent–child pairs lived in the Netherlands, four in the United Kingdom and two in Belgium. The language used within the interviews was adapted to the country of origin. The study had a mix of nano-influencers (i.e., follower counts smaller than 10,000), micro-influencers (i.e., between 10,000 and 100,000 followers) and macro-influencers (i.e., between 100,000 and one million followers) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) (see Table 1 in Appendix).

The interviews took place between February and April 2021, and the respondents were contacted through private messages on Instagram and/or through email. The snowball method was used, as parents of kidfluencers further contacted other kidfluencers' parents to participate. The parents' interviews lasted approximately 53 minutes, and those of the kidfluencers lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher and were organised through MS Teams or Zoom because of the Covid-19 pandemic and strict measures regarding travel and social contact.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. The parents' and children's questionnaires were identically structured; that is, they answered the same questions formulated from another point of view. The only difference was that, for some questions, we incorporated different stimuli and projective techniques for the participating kidfluencers. For instance, when exploring how children might be coerced into labour within the context of kidfluencer activities, children were represented with statements such as *'I am a kidfluencers because my mother pushes me to be'*, and had to respond using their thumbs (up/down/middle). Another scenario involved showing them a video featuring a little girl being directed by the camera (a metaphor for the child's parents) to perform specific actions, visibly unhappy. After viewing the video, the child was asked what they thought was happening. Subsequently, the interviewer explained the video and questioned if the situation seemed familiar to the child. The interview guide consisted of five parts. The interview started with introductory questions (including their age, social media channels, media usage and content). Second, we discussed the kidfluencers' motivations (and parents' role) with regard to commercial partnerships and delved deeper into how transparent their communication is. Third, self-disclosure practices were questioned, but only with parents, given that children under the age of 13 years are not able to balance disadvantages and advantages regarding privacy issues associated with openness on social media (Wagner & Gasche, 2018). Fourth, the parents' roles regarding the kidfluencers' activities were discussed. Finally, questions were asked about the kidfluencers' motives, how they are being represented online and what impact being a kidfluencer could have on well-being. Throughout all parts of the interview, the role of the kidfluencers' followers was discussed.

We used an analytical framework analysis, whereby we assigned codes and compiled them into developed categories to organise, structure and summarise the data that relate to our research questions (Gale et al., 2013). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded by

the first author. However, to reduce potential bias in interpretation, the second author checked the coding of the first two interviews. Using NVivo11, we first used central codes similar to the themes in the interview guide (social media, authenticity, privacy issues, parent's role, followers' role, and well-being) per group of respondents (kidfluencers and parents). The code scheme was modified in subsequent rounds of coding by inductively adding more detailed lower-level codes. More specifically, we coded the data by dissecting authenticity in terms of three sociocultural agents: (1) parents, (2) followers and (3) commercial partners. The results of the kidfluencers and those of their parents were compared and are reported together.

The current study complies with ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Prior to conducting the interviews, the study's methodology and ethical considerations underwent a severe review and received approval from the ethics committee of the first author's university department. This committee comprises professionals dedicated to evaluating action plans and actively overseeing the protection of vulnerable groups, including children. Second, in line with Belgian regulations, parental permission was received, and written informed consent was obtained from parents. Subsequently, child assent was obtained, where children were asked if they were participating voluntarily rather than following directions from their parents. Every interviewed child expressed their willingness to participate. Third, several measures were implemented to protect the privacy and anonymity of the (underage) participants. As such, consent forms were securely stored separately from the collected data and each respondent was assigned a pseudonym, allowing for anonymity throughout the whole research process. Fourth, at the start of each interview, both parent and child were informed about their rights (e.g., they could decide to stop at any time during the interview), the goals of the study and how data would be collected and stored. The interviewer took measures to create a safe environment for the children during interviews. This was achieved by providing continuous

encouragement, such as saying 'you're doing great,' and ensuring the children fully understood the questions asked. Children and parents were interviewed separately (first the child, then the parent), but when a child felt uncomfortable being interviewed alone, their parent attended the interview (in total 10 interviews). Finally, every interview was followed by a thorough debriefing session. Particularly with the interviewed children, a more in-depth approach was taken, involving an assessment of their emotional state and the provision of suitable emotional support. Additionally, children were asked about their comfort level during the conversation and if they had any suggestions to enhance the researcher's approach. It is noteworthy that none of the children displayed emotional distress; in fact, each child expressed that they enjoyed the conversation.

## Results

### ***Authenticity versus parents.***

#### *Authenticity construction*

Coding revealed that the kidfluencers' authenticity labour is strongly managed by their parents. The results show that 13 of the 19 interviewed kidfluencers started their channel at the age of 7 years or younger, with the idea of starting a social media channel mainly originating from their parents. The interviewed parents indicated that their main motive for making a social media channel in the name of their child was to collect memories and make an overview of pictures and videos. Additionally, as the majority of the kidfluencers also participated in modelling, their parents saw it as an opportunity to show off their photos online to attract new photographers. However, parents mentioned that they never had the intention for their child to become a social media influencer and that their child's channels grew organically:

**Elizabeth (mother of 9-year-old Sarah):** *When it was her birthday, we made a really nice video of all her gifts. And that video got watched a lot. And then I thought: 'Maybe I should do something with this'. And then people started saying: 'That video is super fun! You should start a channel'. But I had no idea how it worked, so I started figuring it out. Then I posted a few more videos, and suddenly we had a thousand subscribers.*

Still, most kidfluencers indicated that, for them, becoming famous in one way or another had always been a personal dream. They claimed to be intrinsically motivated about modelling for pictures and making videos and genuinely enjoyed being a kidfluencer:

**Interviewer:** *Did you always wanted to become an influencer?*

**Hannah (age 11):** *Yes. And I also wanted to become a YouTuber like MeisjeDjamila* [Famous Dutch influencer]. *Actually, it was a dream of mine to become famous.*

Importantly, results reveal that parents are the main responsible for their children's authenticity management. Although the kidfluencers were the main characters in the published content and their tone of voice was used (i.e., the captions beneath the published content are written from the child's point of view), parents appeared to be managing and fully controlling their children's social media channels, including (1) arranging and securing collaborations, (2) creating and editing content, (3) posting content and writing the captions, (4) interacting with followers and other kidfluencers (and their parents) and (5) securing the safety and privacy of their children. During the interviews, mothers clearly sought recognition for their dedicated efforts and the labour invested in fostering their children's successful influencer status. As such, the interviewed mothers emphasized the strong contrast in workload between themselves and their children by underlining that their children had, in comparison to themselves, little to no workload: *'She just poses for the pictures and gets on with her life'* (Carol, mother of 9-year-old Melany). This underscored the prevailing culture of postfeminist neoliberalism, where mothers win at life by combining their entrepreneurial pursuits with motherhood and making independent and entrepreneurial life choices (Archer, 2019b; Duffy & Hund, 2015). This dynamic challenges kidfluencers to remain authentic and

stay true to themselves (Wellman et al., 2020), as their parents are fully autonomous in determining what and how content is communicated online.

Indeed, the majority of the kidfluencers did not have access to their own profiles, and their parents determined what content would be posted at what time:

> **Elizabeth (mother of 9-year-old Sarah):** *I make the decisions. That's because we've built something up. And that actually cost a lot of blood, sweat and tears. When everyone started watching Netflix series, I was editing all evening. I really put a lot of energy into it. So I'm not going to do some nonsense video now. I want to protect the quality.*

With parents exercising a high level of control over their kidfluencer profiles, the children appeared to experience a certain *parental authenticity paradox*, as they felt a discrepancy between what they want to post and what their parents actually post. To solve this paradoxical experience, nearly every kidfluencer interviewed had their own private social media account on Instagram ('finsta') or TikTok whereon they could post whatever they want: *My professional Instagram account is on my mom's phone. I have another private account and that's just for myself. (*Zoey, 11 years old). In some cases, these profiles are anonymised by using false names so others cannot find them. The kidfluencers stated that they could perform genuine authenticity on these private profiles (dewar et al., 2019), given that they do not have to think about their professionalism. However, this implies that their authenticity is staged, curated and fragmented as they do not maintain a consistent digital identity across various social media profiles (Abidin, 2017a).

### *Child or parent labour?*

Authenticity involves creating a self-presentation that resembles the child's own values and interests (Maares et al., 2020). Parents in this study claim that they do consider the kidfluencer's intrinsic motivations to achieve a successful influencer status. The interviewed kidfluencers acknowledge that they would not have become successful without their parents' guidance because they are not able to monitor and manage their social media platforms on

their own: '*I am quite good with keeping up all my content. But my mom is amazing with all social media. I don't think I'd be here without her or either of my parents'* Emma (11 years old). In this regard, multiple children referred to their mothers as 'momagers' (i.e., an amalgamation of mom and manager): *My mom is my momager. She puts everything on Instagram, and she puts in five hours to make sure everything is perfect* (Camila, 9 years old). In other words, kidfluencers believe that their parents are capable to construct an online identity that is authentic with their own believes and values.

Furthermore, kidfluencers claimed that they did not experience any pressure from their parents with regard to their (commercial) influencer activities: '*People often have prejudices. But I really like doing it and my parents support me in that. They don't tell me 'You have to do this' or 'You have to do that''* Elise (12 years old). Their parents agreed with these results as they did not at all feel that their child was being put under pressure. Even more, they found it frustrating that some people claimed they were using and forcing their children to become kidfluencers, as they believed it was the other way around:

> **Diana (mother of 7-year-old Stella):** *When people say to us that we're using our child, I tell them it's more the other way round. She always asks me: 'Do you want to take photos? Do you want to edit videos?' Because she can't do that herself yet. She gets everything for it. I do it with all my love, but I don't get anything in return.*

Nevertheless, the results in the previous section clearly show that children are urged to start channels and make content, blurring the lines between authentic self-representation and child labour. Besides, even though the kidfluencers in our study claimed not to feel pressured by their parents, it is plausible that kidfluencers want to please their parents by acting in accordance with their demands. For example, although the 11-year-old kidfluencer Hannah mentioned at one point in her interview that she does not feel pressured by her mother, she later claimed that her mother pushes her to exercise her facial expressions:

> **Hannah:** *'Straighten your back', she* [her mother] *usually says, or 'Work on your smile in the mirror'. I used to smile more beautifully, but I'm already used to not doing that anymore because my mother asks me to look more serious. So now I'm not used to smiling anymore, and I have to exercise it in the mirror.*

In other words, parents do not always respect their children's boundaries, which may result in false behaviour and an untruthful representation of the kidfluencer's values, damaging the kidfluencers' authenticity (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022). Another example is Barbara (mother of 12-year-old Elise), who mentioned at one point in the interview that she '*would miss it if she* [her *daughte*r] *said 'I'm quitting''*. Hence, parents might express these feelings towards their children, and as a result, their children might be afraid to disappoint their parents and therefore continue practices that might not be in line with their own authentic representation, resulting in the practice of child labour.

***Authenticity versus followers***

As kidfluencers themselves are not aware of their online audience, parents manage their children's authenticity towards followers. Considering the parents' awareness that having good metrics (e.g., likes and followers) is important to become and remain successful as a kidfluencer, they stay true to their audience by providing it with the content it seeks (Wellman et al., 2020):

> **Helen (mother of 11-year-old Emma):** *Honestly, I'll look at the statistics to see what people are actually enjoying because we love putting our content out there, but we also want it to be liked by everybody else.*

Therefore, the kidfluencers' authenticity seems to be planned and curated from the parents' point of view, as several parents mentioned they had a certain script or even a schedule in which they clearly determined beforehand when they would post their content based on timeslots that suit their audience:

> **Shirley (mother of 9-year-old Camilia):** *[…] It's an advantage that children only have a half day of school on Wednesdays. They may have activities, but they are more often at home. And*

*on Sundays, everyone is bored to death. So then everyone is on YouTube and on Instagram, so well...*

Consequently, coding revealed that kidfluencers' parents experience an *authenticity paradox* (Gilani et al., 2019) where tension arises between what they want to post and what they think the followers would like them to post. Managing and balancing these wishes can be stressful, as they must apply multiple tactics (i.e., engaging, sharing information, being active on different platforms, using hashtags and organising giveaways):

> **Carol (mother of 9-year-old Melany):** *I didn't use strategies at first. It was just for fun. We just posted what we wanted to post and that was it. But as you start to get sent things, you start to get this certain pressure like: 'I need to up my reach, I need to get a certain amount of likes'.*

The interviewed parents acknowledge that their success depends on being perceived as authentic and, thus, sharing intimate details (Chung et al., 2023; Khamis et al., 2016). Consequently, the kidfluencers' parents reported many concerns regarding their child's privacy (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Jorge et al., 2021). Every interviewed parent, except one, had dealt with paedophiles. Particularly, several mothers have received messages, photos and/or videos from paedophiles, sometimes on a very regular basis. These messages were sent with the idea that the child would see them, and not the parent:

> **Ashley (mother of 11-year-old Zoey):** *Paedophiles are the reason that Zoey doesn't have access to her profile. I sometimes receive private messages with videos that are absolutely not meant for her eyes.*

Second, parents are concerned that exposing their child online will have an impact on their further identity development. They fear that their child would blame them for their actions once they are older:

> **Elizabeth (mother of 9-year-old Sarah):** *I know she wants to do this, and that it's her dream and her passion. [...] But it's kind of an internal struggle: What effect will it have in 10 or 20 years? Will she blame me? Because she can now say: 'I want to do it', and then in 10 years perhaps she says: 'Oh mama, why did we do this?'*

Third, intimacy results in vulnerability (Mäkinen, 2021). As such, kidfluencers often received negative reactions, both online and offline. Therefore, parents are concerned about the impact these might have on their children's well-being. Some kidfluencers themselves indicated they do not really care, as they see this as a form of jealousy. Others said it can influence their state of mind but mentioned that their parents support and help them cope with it: *It's like my mum is on the angel side of my shoulder and the others are on the devil side* (Camila, 9 years old).

Lastly, parents mentioned that they are concerned about the digital footprint they are creating for their child and the fact that the content they share will be on the internet forever. For these reasons, various parents experienced a *privacy openness paradox* (Van den Abeele et al., 2023) whereby they encounter inner conflicts between protecting their child's privacy and desiring a successful influencer status for their child. They argued that to become a successful influencer, profiles must be public, and therefore they must carry the possible risks and consequences:

> **Jennifer (mother of 12-year-old Marie):** *It's very contradictory. My child has a public account, so everyone can see her photos, including companies that want to work with her. But, on the other hand, you can also attract other types of people. I'm very aware of that.*

However, to try and cope with these risks, every parent used certain anti-sharenting techniques (Autenrieth, 2018). The main measures were (1) monitoring, blocking and deleting private messages, users and reactions; (2) avoiding nudity in photos; and (3) keeping personal information (e.g., place of residence or school) secret. In addition, several parents indicated that within the kidfluencers' communities, parents supported each other and shared insights and opinions regarding their children's privacy (e.g., they informed each other about strange profiles or gave tips on how to protect their child's privacy).

### *Authenticity versus commercial partners*

Coding revealed that commercial partners also impact kidfluencers' authenticity. First, the

results show that one of the reasons kidfluencers are not allowed to create or post content on their own social media channels is because their parents want their profiles to remain professional:

> **Susan (mother of 11-year-old Olivia):** *I told Olivia that she is not allowed to make videos or selfies on her own. I explained to her that her Instagram account is her business card and that she has to try and see it as a bit of professional work.*

Rather than having authentic spontaneous daily-life pictures, most kidfluencers have their content shot by professional photographers. Parents aim to professionalize their children's content to appear more attractive to commercial brands (Craig & Cunningham, 2017). This way, the kidfluencer's authenticity becomes scripted and a strategic form of self-presentation (Pedersen & Aspevig, 2018; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

Second, as defined by Audrezet et al. (2018), parents must make sure that their children are intrinsically motivated to work with brands. This authenticity management strategy is, however, not fully utilised. Kidfluencers underlined that they truly value the brands they work for, regardless the remuneration they receive, and that their approval, in most cases, is asked by their parents before collaborating with a brand. However, without the kidfluencers' knowledge, several parents stated that they make a certain pre-selection of what they think their child would (not) like. The parents were convinced that they knew their child well enough to decide whether they would like the product and therefore they decide to (not) work with a brand. In other words, the kidfluencers' interests may not be accurately represented within the commercial partnerships. Furthermore, several kidfluencers mentioned situations when they did not want to create content or collaborate. Although their parents usually do not push them to do so, four kidfluencers recalled that this has led to parent–child conflicts:

> **Hannah (11 years old):** *Sometimes, when I come home from school, my mom says: 'You have to do this now'. And then I'll tell her that I don't want to. But then I must do it. […]*

**Interviewer:** *And what does your mom say when you tell her you don't want to?*

**Hannah:** *She tells me I have to because otherwise brands won't ask me anymore.*

In line with these children, half the parents experienced how conflict can arise, especially when they get carried away by the stress that comes with creating content for commercial partners:

**Michelle (mother of 9-year-old Sophia):** *Like, obviously, I'm not going to make her do anything she doesn't want to do. But sometimes we have deadlines and things have to be posted at certain times. And it can be a mad rush and the stress can come in and it's like: *argh* we have to get this posted!*

Although the majority of parents believed this to be a form of parenting (i.e., teaching your child to take responsibility), such situations could influence the intrinsic motivations of kidfluencers to work for and with a brand.

Furthermore, the results showed that kidfluencers' parents are not transparent (as defined by Audrezet et al. (2018)) when working with brands. First, the interviewed parents did not properly disclose their children's sponsored posts to uncover the persuasive intent. They indicated that their regulatory knowledge is insufficient to correctly apply regulations and mentioned that available information regarding sponsorship disclosures is often unclear or contradictory. Remarkably, almost all the respondents indicated that brands do not inform them about applicable regulations, even though they are obligated to inform influencers about their legal requirements (i.e., making sponsorship disclosures). One mother even indicated that she was explicitly asked not to mention that it was a collaboration:

**Diana (mother of 7-year-old Stella)**: *For example, I'm currently working with a company, and they have asked specifically to caption my content with some kind of adventure story, and I'm not allowed to say that it's sponsored. [...] I have to show that I bought it myself or something like that.*

Second, although all the kidfluencers claimed that they worked only with brands they supported, they would sometimes receive a product they did not like. Despite their discontent,

most kidfluencers and parents indicated that they still decided to promote it. In other words, kidfluencers feel restricted when it comes to sharing honest opinions about collaborations and find it hard to give a truthful, fact-based review to their followers:

> **Interviewer:** *So you didn't mention to the brands or to your followers that you actually didn't like the product?*
>
> **Melany (9 years old):** *No.*
>
> **Interviewer:** *For what reason?*
>
> **Melany:** *[…] I just know that they've sent it for free and I don't want to depromote them.*

### Discussion

By giving children a voice and questioning both parents and kidfluencers themselves through 19 in-depth interviews, this study is the first to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the kidfluencer phenomena by exploring how kidfluencers manage their authenticity and gaining insights into the production process of kidfluencer content.

A first key finding is that in this study, only mothers were in charge of managing the kidfluencers' profiles, with limited authenticity labour performed by the children. One plausible explanation is that the mothers in our study prefer to monetize not only their private lives but also the influencer activities of their children, aiming to achieve a 'mumpreneur status' (i.e., combining work with parenting) (Archer, 2019a). This preference is likely driven, in part, by the challenges many mothers encounter in balancing motherhood with paid employment (Mäkinen, 2021). Guiding their children toward a successful influencer status allows these mothers to embody a postfeminist neoliberal culture (Archer, 2019b; Jorge et al., 2021). Within our findings, this cultural framework becomes evident in various ways. First, mothers attain autonomy and independence by making decisions and efforts to establish their children's online brand, simultaneously earning social capital for their children (and themselves as parents) in the form of likes and followers. These efforts afford mothers,

through the profiles of their children, the freedom to share personal stories and portray their children and family lives in ways aligned with the post-feminist focus on self-expression and the ideals of a have-it-all mentality (Duffy, 2017). Moreover, mothers construct a do-it-all identity by positioning themselves as the primary architects of their children's digital success, embodying a narrative of self-made postfeminist women who succeed in every facet of life through dedication and strategic efforts (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Jorge et al., 2023; Mäkinen, 2021). Second, their role, conceptualized in this paper as 'momagers,' empowers mothers to challenge traditional perceptions that often relegate them to primary caregivers, while fathers are cast as the primary financial providers (Duffy, 2017; Mäkinen, 2021). As such, they can convert their children's social capital into economic capital, allowing them to liberate themselves from paid labour and combine childcare with income generation. This transformation also includes opportunities for travel and the receipt of complimentary products. This nuanced dynamic contributes to the postfeminist neoliberal culture, allowing mothers to embrace a sense of individual empowerment and reshape conventional visions of familial roles (Song, 2023).

Second, our findings revealed that kidfluencers' authenticity is entirely managed by their parents. Therefore, in future literature, kidfluencers' authenticity management should be defined as the process of parents finding the ideal balance between (1) their children's actual identity, (2) how they want to present their children (e.g., to be perceived as 'good parents'), (3) how their followers would like to see their children and (4) how their children would appear attractive to commercial partners. Thus, rather than authenticity being a construct that reflects the ability to stay true to oneself (Wellman et al., 2020), authenticity within a kidfluencer context covers realness and genuineness through the lens of mothers and how they perceive (and want others to perceive) their child's identity, meanwhile establishing a brand that is attractive for both followers and commercial partners (Jorge et al., 2022). This paper

hereby refers to the potential occurrence of a ‘parental authenticity paradox’, highlighting differences that may arise between the expectations of parents and children regarding the management of a kidfluencer’s authenticity. This is also reflected in the finding that the kidfluencer’s authenticity is not depicted through calibrated amateurism (Abidin, 2017a) as parents aim to produce content that looks professional, rather than amateurish (i.e., made by the kidfluencers themselves), in order to attract potential commercial partners (Craig & Cunningham, 2017). Besides, they continuously use certain tactics and select certain content to meet the needs and interests of their audience (Khamis et al., 2016) rather than posting what their child would like to post. Parents are, furthermore, manipulating the kidfluencer’s followers into believing that the posted content originates directly from the kidfluencer, therefore manipulating the perception of authenticity (Faleatua, 2018; Gilani et al., 2019). As a result of their parents’ practices, kidfluencers seek refuge in creating their own finsta’s on which they can genuinely perform authenticity (dewar et al., 2019). This does not only prove that their public profile is an inauthentic representation from their offline self as it does not represent their genuine daily life experiences, but also that the kidfluencer’s authenticity is curated and that their digital identity is fragmented as it differs across various social media profiles (Abidin, 2017b).

A plausible explanation could be that parents perceive their children as their [extended] self and therefore depict them online as a way to represent themselves as ‘good’ parents (Holiday et al., 2020; Jorge et al., 2022). Besides, creating a successful online persona that meets all expectations of followers and commercial partners also contributes to the mothers’ own self-worth (i.e., child-invested contingent self-esteem; ‘my child is doing well, so I am doing well as a parent’) (Wuyts et al., 2015). In the run to making their child successful online and establish a strong self-brand, however, mothers encounter a *privacy openness paradox* (Chalklen & Anderson, 2017) as they must continuously balance their

children's right for privacy and the benefits of openness (i.e., being perceived as authentic, hence, receiving validation from their audience). As such, and in line with research by Jorge et al. (2021) and Archer (2019a), parents in our study experience a *privacy paradox*, as they are concerned about their children's privacy yet continue to portray them online. Strikingly, they are not only afraid of online harassment (e.g., Wagner & Gasche, 2018) but have experienced such negative situations themselves, as they are often victims of sexual harassment. Certain anti-sharenting techniques (i.e., avoiding nudity, not mentioning personal information, and monitoring their followers/messages) are used to minimise these potential risks (Autenrieth, 2018). However, it remains unclear whether these precautions are effective in preventing harm to their children.

Furthermore, parents construct their children's authenticity by managing commercial partnerships. Although kidfluencers claim to be intrinsically motivated when working with partners, their passionate authenticity is harmed as their own interests are not always fully represented in the choice of brand, and conflicts may occur when shooting commercial content. Besides, their parents are not able to give them fact-based information and disclose the commercial intent of collaborations, damaging the kidfluencers' transparent authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018). Indeed, the process of authenticity management in the context of kidfluencers is a multidimensional and biased one that involves the interplay between various actors and their respective demands and expectations.

**Practical and public policy implications**

In addition to added scientific value, our study holds practical and public policy implications. First, any regulation aimed at addressing child labour in the influencer industry must take into account this delicate balance between the labour of the parent and the labour of the child, as well as the potential impact it can have on the child's well-being. Illinois in the United states serves as a notable example, having implemented a law for kidfluencers. This law ensures that

children receive a share of the earnings from the content featuring them, held in a trust until they turn 18 (Yang, 2023). However, we believe that essential measures to effectively safeguard the well-being and privacy of children are still lacking. As such, current legislation falls short in restricting the workload for children. Therefore, we recommend that regulations specify the number of permitted activities, ensuring that kidfluencer activities do not compromise the leisure time of young children. We recognize the complexity of striking this balance, given the ambiguity between work and play, making monitoring a challenging task. Nevertheless, we propose that implementing certain limitations, such as restricting the number of collaborations per year, could present a viable solution to this issue. Furthermore, in the current legal landscape, parental guardianship extends to overseeing their children's online privacy and well-being (Steinberg, 2016). Our findings, importantly, highlight a notable power imbalance between mothers and children in the realm of kidfluencer marketing, where mothers often have full control over their children's influencer activities. This gives rise to an important discrepancy. On one hand, parents are entrusted with the responsibility to safeguard their children's online privacy and act in the child's best interest. On the other hand, these same parents may compromise their children's well-being and privacy as their children's influencer work becomes highly profitable (van der Hof et al., 2020). In other words, the current legislative framework places the responsibility on parents, yet fails to establish adequate safeguards against potential violations committed by parents themselves. Consequently, a legislative framework to consider and implement guidelines that foster a safer online environment for children is necessary. One practical solution could involve integrating a neutral party or person into the kidfluencer marketing process. This neutral entity would be tasked with prioritizing the best interests of children, ensuring that their well-being and privacy take precedence in the evolving landscape of kidfluencer marketing practices.

Second, when working with kidfluencers, brands should consistently provide comprehensive briefings to both parents and young influencers, emphasizing relevant regulations. Our results for instance, uncovered a lack of transparency regarding the commercial intent in sponsored posts by kidfluencers. To address this, brands should provide kidfluencers with briefings throughout the entire content creation process, encompassing the stages before, during, and after content creation. Within these briefings, brands should emphasize that the disclosure of content as commercial is paramount. It should be communicated that failure to adhere to these rules by parents may lead to termination of the collaboration at any time, potentially resulting in consequences such as exclusion from future partnerships. Moreover, our research identified instances where kidfluencers are unwilling to produce online content, causing stress for their mothers as they strive to meet brand deadlines. To tackle this issue, brands should extend their efforts beyond briefings and incorporate training sessions, which could take the form of webinars or workshops. These sessions should encourage a more flexible approach towards kidfluencers and their parents. The training should guide brands in adopting a less strict attitude regarding deadlines, prioritizing the well-being of kidfluencers, and fostering an environment that nurtures their creative freedom.

Finally, parents play a pivotal role in shaping their child's kidfluencer profile. Therefore, awareness must be raised amongst parents about the consequences of kidfluencer activities, both in the short and long run. It is advisable to develop interventions or tools aimed at assisting parents of kidfluencers in navigating legal and ethical considerations, while also encouraging adherence to self-regulatory measures. For example, a website could be developed that educates parents about the privacy risks associated with depicting children online and provides them with clear guidelines for minimising potential harm to their child(ren).

## Limitations and future research

Despite careful preparation for the interview study, some limitations should be noted. First, the presence of parents during the interviews can be seen as a limitation, given that children are likely to feel inhibited in their reactions when their parents are listening. Second, the lexical capacity of the children was rather limited, suggesting that they may not have been able to verbalise their thoughts completely. Lastly, we were not able to detect any long-term effects of being a kidfluencer and, due to the qualitative nature of the study, the results cannot be generalised.

This study is the first to explore kidfluencers' authenticity management and its production process, but research on senders of commercial messages is limited. First, we recommend future longitudinal and cross-cultural research with kidfluencers that investigates the extent to which children experience long-term effects on their well-being and identity while growing up as a kidfluencer, and how their authenticity management changes over time. This is especially important during the turning point to adolescence, where their identity is still forming and peer relationships become more important and might be relevant in this regard. Second, this study (unintentionally) solely focused on mothers and did not explore the involvement of other parents, such as fathers. It is, however, important to examine to their role and contribution to their children's influencer activities. Third, future research should further examine the potential privacy threats that children experience in influencer sharenting practices, including the children of mom-, dad- and family-influencers. While survey research could further determine the degree to which these children experience different types of privacy threats, intervention research could investigate whether certain strategies could be used to protect their privacy (e.g., strategies proposed by Autenrieth (2018)). Lastly, this study focused solely on the responsibilities of followers, parents and commercial brands. We recommend that future research emphasizes the responsibility of other stakeholders. For

instance, YouTube, a social media platform that is frequently used by kidfluencers, actively encourages users to monetize their YouTube channels through analytic tools, rewards systems and tutorials (Ghani & Cambre, 2020). Research delving into the strategies employed by social media platforms to leverage kidfluencers within their ecosystems would be useful. Besides, future research should address the shortcomings of the existing legislative framework's shortcomings regarding kidfluencers.

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