

The (un)necessity of child portrayal in momfluencer content: Exploring mothers' perspectives on influencer sharenting through in-depth interviews

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The (un)necessity of child portrayal in momfluencer content: Exploring mothers' perspectives on influencer sharenting through in-depth interviews

Momfluencers heavily disclose personal information and pictures of their children on their social media as they aim to share parenting experiences with their followers. Including their children in their content may make them appear more authentic and increase their celebrity capital. However, empirical research testing this assumption is scarce. Importantly, the portrayal of children in influencer sharenting has raised concern regarding the privacy of the portrayed child and the related consequences for the child's well-being. Through 20 in-depth interviews with followers of momfluencers, we assessed the perceptions of and attitudes towards child portrayal in momfluencer content and privacy-protective behaviors. The mothers in our study appeared to be highly concerned about the risks related to sharenting behaviors. While these mothers believed that portraying children in momfluencer content is essential to enhance their perceptions of credibility, authenticity, and intimacy; they emphasized that this can be achieved while protecting the child's privacy through the use of anti-sharenting techniques. Transparent communication about the choices momfluencers make regarding these techniques appeared to be essential for fostering meaningful relationships. In addition, momfluencers who employ anti-sharenting techniques and transparently explain their reasons for doing so may have the potential to influence changes in followers' own sharenting behavior. These findings emphasize the potential of anonymizing children in momfluencer content, enabling momfluencers to protect their children's online privacy while maintaining the affordances of sharenting.

Introduction

With the rise of social media, mothers have embraced the practice of sharing their motherhood experiences online, with some of them becoming widely followed and influential figures known as 'momfluencers' (Holiday et al., 2021; Jorge et al., 2021). These momfluencers focus exclusively on sharing their personal motherhood experiences, creating content that strongly resonates with a niche community of (first-time) mothers. In doing so, they offer support and solace during the often challenging transition to motherhood (Ouvrein, 2022). Due to this intimate bond they foster with their audience, momfluencers serve as effective tools for advertisers seeking to promote their (parenting-related) products (Beuckels & De Jans, 2022). This phenomenon, where family lives are narrated and monetized through paid partnerships, is termed influencer sharenting. Different from regular sharenting, influencer sharenting involves the use of social media platforms by influencers—both ordinary and those specializing in parenting—to share content about their family lives (Van den Abeele et al., 2023). However, despite the comfort and support that momfluencer content may provide to these young mothers, several researchers have highlighted their concerns regarding the significant role children play in momfluencers' online success (Ågren, 2023; Buvár & Orosz, 2023; Nottingham, 2019).

As such, the online success of influencers depends on three key factors: credibility (i.e., being perceived as a trustworthy expert), authenticity (i.e., being true to oneself and sharing things that are genuine) and intimacy (i.e., being able to establish a parasocial relationship with followers), all of which often require disclosure of personal information (Hudders et al., 2020). Consequently, momfluencers frequently share intimate details about their children and family lives (Abidin, 2015; Ågren, 2023). A conducted content analysis by Jimenez et al. (2021), for instance, has shown that children are present in nearly half of momfluencers' published content. By doing so, momfluencers expose their children to various online risks (Hudders et al., 2022). As a result, several researchers have emphasized

the importance of safeguarding children's online privacy within influencer activities and recognizing children's right to construct their own digital identity (Fox & Hoy, 2019; Steinberg, 2016; van der Hof et al., 2019).

Earlier qualitative research with momfluencers has demonstrated that while momfluencers acknowledge the necessity of protecting their children's privacy, they find it challenging to refrain from sharing intimate details about their children (Archer, 2019; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Van den Abeele et al., 2023). As such, they believe that the portrayal of children may strongly contribute to their digital capital, and are afraid that they may lose certain immediate benefits when deciding not to disclose information about their children (Van den Abeele et al., 2023). Research on audience engagement among influencers indeed suggests that sharing content related to one's social connections enhances audience engagement (Chung et al., 2023). This heightened engagement can be attributed to the increased authenticity and similarity perceived by the audience when influencers disclose content about their social ties. These factors, authenticity and similarity, contribute to influencers' perceived expertise and the personal connection followers establish with them (Chung et al., 2023; Leite & Baptista, 2022). In other words, one could assume that the portrayal of children by momfluencers is necessary in order to establish celebrity capital as such self-disclosure heightens momfluencers' credibility, authenticity and similarity (Heřmanová, 2023). However, audience research revealing to what extent followers of momfluencers do in fact believe that the portrayal of children in momfluencer content is necessary, is lacking.

Furthermore, a possible solution to enable parents to portray their children online while respecting their privacy is through anti-sharenting techniques (Autenrieth, 2018). These photo techniques shift the attention away from the child's face and instead emphasize the surrounding visual and spatial elements captured in the images, which could potentially

resolve the dilemma faced by momfluencers between protecting their child's privacy and maintaining a successful influencer status (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Jorge et al., 2021). However, detailed research exploring the attitudes of momfluencers' followers toward these anti-sharenting techniques is lacking.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is twofold. First, our current study seeks to provide insights into how followers of momfluencers (i.e., mothers of young children) perceive the relationship between child portrayal and their perceptions of credibility, authenticity, and intimacy towards momfluencers. Second, this study wants to provide a deeper understanding of the attitudes, perceptions, and emotions of these mothers regarding various anonymization techniques. These aims will be tackled by conducting in-depth interviews among 20 Flemish followers of momfluencers. The gathered insights carry crucial implications, offering a balanced approach to safeguarding the privacy of children while enabling the attainment of a successful momfluencer status. This paper stands as the pioneering exploration of mothers' perspectives on the (anonymous) portrayal of micro-micro celebrities (i.e., children that have derived fame through the sharenting practices of their influencer parents; Abidin, 2015).

Theoretical framework

Momfluencers' road to success

Becoming a (first-time) mother can be an exciting, yet overwhelming, stressful and insecure period in one's life (Smith et al., 2020). Many mothers seek refuge in finding, sharing, and asking for information and social support from other parents on social media (Archer & Kao, 2018). Consequently, social media usage increases among pregnant women as it helps them connect and bond with other new parents (Harpel, 2018; Hicks & Brown, 2016; Smith et al., 2020). Today, a significant amount of these mothers are fervent followers of momfluencers (Ouvrein, 2022). Momfluencers are popular social media users who are mothers themselves

and share a great amount of information about their children, motherhood experiences, and family lives while establishing a strong bond with their audience (Chee et al., 2023; Ouvrein, 2022). The distinction between regular influencers with children stems from their exclusive focus on their experiences of motherhood and parenting, thereby forming a niche community of mothers. While children of momfluencers take a central role in their mothers' Instagram, children of regular influencers are depicted on a less frequent basis and less personal information is disclosed (Van den Abeele et al., 2023). Indeed, it is important to note that regular influencers who become mother often shift their focus and commercial deals more towards the realm of parenting.

Momfluencers build social and financial capital through credibility, authenticity, and intimacy (Heřmanová, 2023; Hudders et al., 2020). However, not all individuals sharenting posts equally contribute to these goals. Momfluencers carefully build their profiles, employing a unique combination of stories, reels, and posts where they disclose personal information about their children and portray their children to share their experiences with parenting. This unique collection of information and portrayals contributes to perceptions of credibility, authenticity, and intimacy

Credibility. Momfluencers must build and maintain credibility among their followers in order to establish online success (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Source credibility involves judgements of a source's expertise and trustworthiness within the specific domain of motherhood (Feng et al., 2021; Ohanian, 1990; Serman & Sims, 2023; Wellman, 2023).

Expertise, defined as perceived knowledge, competence, and the ability to convey legitimate information, is particularly important for momfluencers, given their focus on a niche community, namely mothers (Wellman, 2023). Expertise can be gained through education and professional experience, but also through lived experiences, as a mother in the case of momfluencing (Beuckels & De Jans, 2022; Egmoose et al., 2022; Wellman, 2023).

Momfluencers build their expertise by consistently engaging in conversations about parenting-related topics, with special emphasis on maternal physical and mental well-being (Jorge et al., 2021). Integrating personal stories with professional expertise and accompanying selfies or photos of friends in influencer content can remarkably enhance audience engagement, as shown by Feng et al. (2021).

By building expertise, momfluencers can become trustworthy sources of advice as they appear to 'know what they are talking about'. They have the unique ability to evaluate cultural products based on personal preferences, unaffected by popular opinions (Heřmanová, 2023). This trustworthiness, defined as perceptions of sincerity and honest information, is a key element for momfluencers to establish online success (Hovland et al., 1953; Masuda et al., 2022). Transparency and consistency achieved through openness about who they are and what their mission is, along with consistent behavior over time, are crucial dimensions of trustworthiness (Wellman, 2023). In this matter, the sharing of children can be perceived as important as children serve as a means of digital capital (Ågren, 2023). Incorporating children into momfluencers' content can infuse a personal voice into their narrative, amplifying followers' sense of identification and trust, particularly with the role of a mother (Feng et al., 2021). Opting not to showcase one's children may potentially undermine credibility levels, raising doubts about momfluencers' trustworthiness and expertise as mothers (e.g., is she really a mother?). However, delving deeper into the subject is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of how the portrayal of children is perceived as essential by mothers of young children in considering momfluencers as credible. Therefore, a first research question is formulated:

RQ1: To what extent do mothers believe that portraying children is essential to enhance their perceptions of credibility regarding momfluencers?

Authenticity. Second, authenticity plays an important role in achieving success in the online sphere (Maares et al., 2020). Momfluencers establish authenticity by sharing intimate glimpses into their everyday life and discussing intimate details regarding their role as mothers (Abidin, 2017a; Heřmanová, 2023). Wellman et al. (2020) thereby argue that influencers rely on an ethics of authenticity, which entails two fundamental aspects: first, staying true to themselves, and second, remaining authentic to their audience by providing the content the audience seeks. For momfluencers, this would involve sharing their experiences as mothers, including their relationships with their children. As such, by not including their children in their content, followers may believe that momfluencers are withholding an important aspect of their lives, creating an inauthentic presence. Thus, not surprisingly, the portrayal of children is assumed as important. For instance, a mixed-method study by Chung et al. (2023) has shown that sharing content about one's social ties enhances the perception of authenticity among followers. Besides, the concept of honest motherhood has emerged as a prevailing trend, with momfluencers openly addressing the challenges associated with (first-time) motherhood, hoping their followers will perceive them as more genuine and real (Ågren, 2023). However, although this research establishes important results with regard to followers' expectations towards the self-disclosure of influencers, in-depth research among mothers in specific is lacking with regard to how they believe and perceive that the portrayal of children in momfluencer content is necessary in order to perceive momfluencers as authentic. Therefore, we formulate a second research question:

RQ2: To what extent do mothers believe that portraying children is essential to enhance their perceptions of authenticity regarding momfluencers?

Intimacy. Finally, establishing intimacy between influencers and followers is considered essential for achieving online success. The social penetration theory states that self-disclosure (i.e., encompassing emotions, personal experiences and beliefs) plays a crucial role in

establishing social connections between individuals (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Kim & Song, 2016). In the realm of influencer marketing, these connections are referred to as parasocial interactions, representing the imagined one-sided relationships experienced by followers of influencers (Hudders et al., 2020). Momfluencers cultivate such relationships by consistently sharing personal updates about their children and family lives, and actively engaging with their audiences (Abidin, 2015). Several researchers have emphasized that the truthful sharing of narratives concerning the demanding aspects of parenthood and the day-to-day experiences of their children fosters the development of an intimate connection between momfluencers and their followers (Ågren, 2023; Holiday et al., 2021). In this regard, one may assume that the portrayal of children is necessary. Although self-disclosure can be achieved through textual narrations, a combination of visual elements is important to transfer emotions and experiences, particularly on Instagram, where visual content takes center stage and textual captions play a supporting role (Chung et al., 2023; Feng et al., 2021). Failing to include children in momfluencers' narratives might create a disconnect between momfluencers and their followers, potentially disrupting the sense of social presence (i.e., the psychological sense of being emotionally engaged in interactions with others within a digital environment; Kim & Song, 2016). Furthermore, mentioning the child solely in the post's caption might be interpreted as a form of non-self-disclosure, potentially enhancing the perception among followers that they are not valued or trusted by the momfluencers (Leite et al., 2022). This could lead to a sense of unfamiliarity, reducing the level of intimacy felt towards the momfluencers (Kim & Song, 2016). Besides, featuring the child in the visual content may be seen as an act of extending friendship, fostering a sense of connection and warmth (Chung et al., 2023; Chung & Cho, 2017). It can heighten the perceived similarity and identification that mothers feel toward momfluencers, enabling a closer connection to the shared experiences of motherhood (Feng et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there remains a gap in our understanding of

how mothers of young children perceive the role of children in shaping the bond they share with momfluencers. Consequently, a third research question emerges:

RQ3: To what extent do mothers believe that portraying children is essential to enhance their perceptions of intimacy regarding momfluencers?

Influencer sharenting: finding a middle ground

Existing research clearly shows that momfluencers struggle with their need to portray their children online and their children's need for privacy (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Jorge et al., 2021; Van den Abeele et al., 2023). Mothers truly enjoy portraying their children as they want to show others how proud they are of them, and it facilitates connecting and interacting with other parents (Archer, 2019; Pettigrew et al., 2016). Children, thus, become extensions of their mothers' online brands (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). Hence, a privacy openness paradox occurs where mothers are afraid to lose their immediate benefits, further stimulating them to disclose personal information (Chalklen & Anderson, 2017; Van den Abeele et al., 2023). In an attempt to resolve this paradoxical behavior, influencer parents commonly implement various strategies to safeguard their children's privacy. These measures include using pseudonyms, refraining from sharing sensitive information, avoiding nude content, and removing unfamiliar followers (Archer, 2019; Campana et al., 2020; Jorge et al., 2021). Despite the undoubtedly useful nature of these measures, these do not directly tackle the portrayal of the child in the photos.

As such, when the child is still visibly portrayed, the child's identity may still be revealed. Therefore, based on in-depth interviews and ethnographic online observations among regular parents of young children, Autenrieth (2018) has devised five anti-sharenting techniques which allow parents to share content about their children, yet not showing their children's identity. These methods offer subtle solutions that most often avoid showing the face of the child, such as the disguised child (where children's faces, particularly their eyes,

are covered without photo processing), the faraway child (photographing the child from a distance), the parted child (capturing only a part of the child) and the child from behind (photographing the child from behind) (Autenrieth, 2018). The digitally processed child technique stands out, involving post-production steps to conceal children's faces, often by using emojis or other digital means. The application of these techniques is considered as a form of mindful sharenting, encompassing all strategies used by parents to reduce the potential negative effects of sharenting due to parents' awareness that their sharenting practices can have an impact on their children's privacy (Walrave et al., 2023).

While these techniques offer a potential middle ground between momfluencers' desire to share their children online and their children's need for privacy, the attitudes of mothers toward these anonymization methods and their potential influence on perceptions of expertise, authenticity, and intimacy with momfluencers are yet to be explored. Therefore, the last research question is proposed:

RQ4: What is the attitude of mothers toward the usage of anti-sharenting techniques in momfluencer content, and do they perceive that these techniques alter their perceptions of expertise, authenticity and intimacy towards momfluencers?

Method

To answer our research questions, a guided in-depth interview method was employed. This study draws upon 20 in-depth interviews that took place between July 2023 and August 2023. Purposive sampling was used to align with the study's objectives. Participants were required to meet two criteria: (1) be mothers of at least one child younger than 8 years old and (2) follow at least one momfluencer on Instagram. These criteria were used as previous research has indicated that the main audience of momfluencers consist of mothers of young children (Ouvrein, 2022). All participants were recruited through a call for participation on the first

author's social media channels. The term 'momfluencer' was explicitly defined in the recruitment call. Before the interviews, each mother completed a brief questionnaire, providing information on the number and ages of their children (Table 1), the momfluencers they followed, and the frequency of their exposure to momfluencer content on Instagram. Each respondent indicated encountering momfluencer content on Instagram at least once daily. Interviews were conducted in person at a location chosen by the respondent and lasted approximately 55 min.

Table 1. Overview of the interviewed mothers

Respondent	Amount of children ^a	Age children
R1	3	2, 7, and 9 years
R2	1	3 months
R3	1	3 years
R4	2	1 and 2 years
R5	2	2 and 4 years
R6	3	8, 7, and 4 years
R7	2	2 and 4 years
R8	2	5 and 9 years
R9	2	9 months and 3 years
R10	2	2 years and 4 years
R11	1	1 year
R12	1	7 months
R13	2	3 and 5 years
R14	1	1 year
R15	2	8 months and 2 years
R16	2	5 and 6 years
R17	1	4 years
R18	1	5 months
R19	1	7 years
R20	2	5 and 8 years

^aAt time of the interview

The interview guide started by exploring when and why mothers began following momfluencers, gaining insights into the content they found most and least engaging (e.g., ‘*What content do you believe is most interesting to see?*’). Afterwards, questions addressed

each of the three momfluencer characteristics—credibility, authenticity, and intimacy. Participants were asked to provide their perceptions regarding the credibility (e.g. *‘How do you think momfluencers obtain credibility regarding parenthood information?’*) and authenticity (e.g., *‘How do you believe momfluencers give insights into their personal life?’*) of momfluencers and the extent to which they identified with and felt connected to them (e.g., *‘What makes you feel as if you’re on the same page with momfluencers?’*). Following this, questions were asked on how the inclusion of children in momfluencer content contributes to these characteristics. Specifically, participants were asked about their attitudes towards the (anonymous) portrayal of children in momfluencer content and how it influences their perceptions of momfluencers’ authenticity, expertise and intimacy (e.g., *‘To what extent do you need child portrayal to feel connected with momfluencers?’*). Furthermore, participants shared their attitudes towards anti-sharenting techniques. A photo-elicitation technique was hereby used where participants were requested to rank five images of anonymization techniques outlined by Autenrieth (2018) (Appendix A) (Harper, 2002). By letting the participants reflect on their decisions, this method aims to stimulate participants' perspectives and provide richer data than words alone (Harper, 2002). Additionally, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how anonymization techniques can be integrated into a momfluencer's profile, participants were presented with a momfluencer's profile that featured various anonymization techniques throughout.

After conducting the interviews, the process involved the transcription and rereading of the interviews. By fully immersing and rereading the data, this study guaranteed an all-encompassing analysis to understand the key points mentioned by participants. The initial analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Employing both inductive and deductive approaches, the first author searched and identified similar themes before coding the data with Nvivo11. This systematic approach

facilitated the organization of data into relevant categories, forming the study's findings foundation. Afterwards, the coding themes were refined, adjusted and/or combined in subsequent coding rounds by inductively incorporating more detailed lower-level codes.

This study upholds ethical standards in qualitative research. Ethical approval was received from the lead author's university department prior to conducting interviews (approval number 2023-25). Each participant provided written informed consent, detailing the interview's purpose, confidentiality protocols, their access rights to the study's results, and the option to stop the interview at any time. These consent forms were securely stored, apart from the collected data. Moreover, participants were assigned pseudonyms, guaranteeing complete anonymity throughout the research process.

Results

‘The holy three’ and the necessity of (identifiable) child portrayal

Credibility. Every interviewed mother claimed that they follow momfluencers because of their expertise and the information they share, rather than following them to see their children evolve. R9 hereby explained:

‘She has a child, but it is her who communicates. She shares her expertise, knowledge, findings, and more. [...] The child is just a part of her life. I follow momfluencers because of the mom, never because of the children.’

The interviewed mothers often relied on momfluencers’ expertise in various topics, including breastfeeding, parenting, nutrition, and children's sleeping behavior. Furthermore, they believed that *‘becoming a mother is a very insecure period’* (R8) and highly appreciated honest representations and recognition: *‘I think it's great to get a more nuanced perspective on life with children and the recognition that it's not always perfect.’*

Furthermore, most mothers believed that featuring a child is necessary to enhance the informativeness and trustworthiness of momfluencers' posts: *'It's like being a food blogger who wouldn't photograph their dishes. After all, you can only share content about food and recipes if you show the chicken and guacamole you are preparing, right?'* (R19). They mentioned that not featuring a child could undermine the credibility of the information shared by momfluencers. R(13) explained this as follows: *'I think you'd lose your credibility if you would never portray your child. I'd start wondering: is there really a child? Are you really a mother?'*. However, oversharing and/or only focusing on the child could undermine the momfluencer's perceived credibility. The respondents believed that certain content is *'too intimate'* (R13) and/or *'suffocating'* (R8). Furthermore, it could make them question *'the amount of time these mothers actually spend with their children instead of being on their phones'* (R6).

Importantly, mothers underlined that it would not matter if the child's identity remained anonymous. As such, they believed that showing just a part of the child can enhance momfluencers' trustworthiness (i.e., confirming that the child actually exists) and convey the desired expertise. One participant (R14) hereby explained: *'In the case of breastfeeding, it's helpful to see occasional photos of them nursing. Yet, it doesn't necessarily have to show the child's face; even a picture from behind serves the purpose'*. However, in this regard, one mother (R19) argued that it depends on the context, stating: *'For activities, seeing children's faces and expressions indicates how much fun they're having, which is a crucial factor for me.'*

Authenticity. Mothers defined authenticity as the capacity to offer genuine insights into the life of a mother, encompassing the challenges and uncertainties that arise along the way. One respondent explained (R10): *'When momfluencers also share their difficulties, you feel like you're glimpsing more authentic facets of their life.'* In line with previous results

concerning expertise, mothers asserted that including children is essential to paint a complete, authentic picture. One mother (R9) expressed her perspective, stating: *'I think, considering that children are a significant part of your life, there's a certain obligation to showcase them at specific moments.'*

However, according to our participants, children do not necessarily need to be prominently or recognizably featured. Overall, the interviewed mothers believed that what truly matters in the end is the depth of personal and genuine content, rather than the identity of those featured (R6): *'Portraying the children creates a sense of family, yet whether the child is identifiable doesn't matter to me. What holds importance to me is the narrative about the family; the authenticity of the content.'*

Intimacy. All of the interviewed mothers expressed a strong sense of connection with momfluencers, primarily due to the interactions they have with them: *'Having someone answer my questions makes everything feel personal and makes me feel like I am seen and not just a follower.'* (R18). These conversations lead mothers to realize that *'momfluencers are not robots'* (R14).

Once again, the interviewed momfluencers indicated that the portrayal of children is necessary in order to connect with momfluencers. The preference for glimpses of a child arises from the desire to establish a sense of similarity such as living in the same city, having children of similar ages, employing similar parenting styles, or facing relatable challenges, like experiencing a miscarriage or dealing with children who have sleep difficulties. Nevertheless, most of the interviewed mothers claimed that as long as they can discern the child's approximate age and gender, they can establish a sense of identification with the momfluencers. They emphasized that facial expressions revealing the child's identity are unnecessary for this purpose and that it is much more important that the 'mother portrays herself' (R8).

However, although the majority of the respondents underlined that it is unnecessary for children to be recognizable, some mothers acknowledged that not fully seeing how the child looks could somewhat impact the depth of their relationship with the momfluencer (R5): *'I believe that seeing their children contributes more to the feeling of knowing them, but I don't consider it necessary or disruptive when the children are not portrayed.'* (R5). One mother (R18) added that when momfluencers choose not to or rarely portray their children, it *'creates a sense of distance'* and makes her realize that *'this is Instagram, and we're not truly friends.'*

The (anonymous) portrayal of children in momfluencer content

Most of the mothers interviewed acknowledged the positive impact of portraying children in momfluencer content. They recognized children's inherent cuteness, expressive facial features, and ability to capture attention. One mother hereby noted (R10): *'Children's faces trigger more parental emotions, so I think it triggers you more as a follower when you're scrolling through your feed.'* However, all the interviewed mothers expressed various privacy concerns related to influencer sharenting. Nearly every mother emphasized their unease with the notion that the portrayed children did not make the choice themselves:

R2: 'Those children did not choose to be online; it's their mother who decides.

Yes, you can ask a 5-year old if you can film them, and they might say yes, but they are not capable of understanding the consequences and impact. I think it's the parents' responsibility to consider:, "Maybe I shouldn't do that."

Their awareness of this issue leads them to question certain choices made by momfluencers regarding sharing information about their children online (R6): *'When I see certain content appearing, I can't help but wonder: did you discuss this with your child?'* Additionally, mothers expressed concerns about the long-term impact that influencer sharenting might have on the well-being of the featured children: *'There comes a time when the child is 16 and has a*

whole profile of pictures and information about them online for their friends to see. I wouldn't like that either' (R13). Furthermore, the respondents pointed out the risk of misuse of children's online content. They stressed that there is a chance of losing control over shared content, and that it might be used in contexts for which it was not intended (such as pedophile networks).

Despite their privacy concerns, the majority of the interviewed mothers did not disapprove the online portrayal of children in influencer sharenting: *'I believe that's the mother's decision. You might have valid reasons to feature your child online, and that's acceptable. Or you might choose not to, and that's also fine.'* (R12). In other words, most of the respondents did not judge momfluencers' decisions regarding the portrayal of their children. Interestingly, the portrayal of children in sponsored content serves as an exception. As such, the interviewed mothers perceived it as unethical to use children for commercial purposes, as noted by R14: *'You're essentially exploiting the cuteness and charm of your child to make money'*. Several mothers also pointed out that parents can easily *'turn their children into business models'* (R3), with potentially harmful consequences when children become the driver of likes and engagement. Besides, several mothers indicated that legislation concerning the portrayal of children in influencer activities is necessary as they believe that children can easily be exploited by their parents (R6): *'These children are dragged into activities and don't have the time anymore to be bored or have a hobby because everything is settled and organized as their mother needs pictures for her collaborations'*. These concerns led several respondents to deliberately disengage with sponsored content that involves a child, especially when the product is adult-related.

When questioned about their opinions on featuring children anonymously, every interviewed mother responded positively. Even more so, when reflecting on it, they indicated

more positive attitudes towards momfluencers who choose to depict their children in this manner compared to those who do not:

R(16): ‘Why would someone share their child online? It's not for the child; you do it to seek validation as a mother. I certainly believe these momfluencers [who are anonymously portraying their children online] are proud of their children as well. However, they make a conscious choice to prioritize their child's privacy over their own desires and benefits. I find this admirable.’

When the respondents were shown the anonymization techniques and were asked to rank them, they were favorable toward all techniques except for the digital processed child, represented by an emoji. The main reasons were that the emoji is too prominent and, as one respondent (R19) noted: ‘I think it’s almost disrespectful for the child. The child itself is probably a thousand times more beautiful than the ugly emoji covering their face.’. The distinction lies in the fact that the other techniques, such as disguising the child, capturing the child from a distance, showing the child from behind, and partially revealing the child, are perceived as more natural means of anonymizing a child. From all three characteristics, the parents believed that this technique disrupts the momfluencer’s perceived authenticity and the intimacy that mothers are feeling towards them: *‘When an emoji is used, I immediately feel like she's hiding her child from me. In contrast, with the other techniques, it doesn't give off that vibe.’* (R17).

Despite their positive attitudes towards these anti-sharenting techniques, several mothers pointed out that momfluencers who choose to portray their children anonymously will need to put in more effort to make their content stand out in an Instagram feed. The interviewed mothers stressed that momfluencers who engage in influencer sharenting anonymously must invest more effort in (1) the informative value of their posts, (2) the creativity of their content, (3) providing context (e.g., clearly explaining and showing what's

happening in the picture), and (4) varying the anonymization techniques they employ. Crucially, the interviewed mothers emphasized the importance of realism and natural integration. For instance, they pointed out that momfluencers should not appear overly calculated in their attempts to anonymize the content (R7): *'And if you have to anonymize your children, I hope you can still maintain authenticity. It shouldn't come across as if you're forcing them to pose, asking them to look away while you take pictures for Instagram.'* Moreover, they underlined the importance to openly communicate the reasons for not featuring your children online. The mothers expressed curiosity about these motivations and would highly appreciate gaining insights into this decision. Interestingly, every mother claimed that if they were to observe a momfluencer anonymizing their children on their platforms, it would prompt them to reconsider their own sharenting practices: *'When I saw a momfluencer post that she wouldn't portray her child in a recognizable way, it made me reflect on my own behavior like, 'Wow, did I not think that through? Should I reconsider sharing images of my child?'* (R11).

Conclusion and discussion

Our findings shed light on mothers' beliefs and perceptions on the importance of portraying children online to enhance momfluencers' celebrity capital (in terms of authenticity, expertise, and intimacy), and gained in-depth insights into mothers' perceptions toward the anonymous portrayal of children in influencer sharenting and their attitude toward anti-sharenting techniques.

The results show that children are not the primary consideration when deciding to follow a momfluencer, as mothers mainly follow momfluencers to gain recognition and receive an honest and realistic image of motherhood. This is in line with earlier research by Lee et al. (2021) that investigated the motives of consumers to follow regular influencers. Mothers do, however, acknowledge that portraying children can enhance cuteness and

emotional appeal (i.e., as also suggested by research on traditional advertising; Murad et al., 2015), and that portraying them is important to enhance celebrity capital. First, they believe that the child's presence contributes to the credibility of the momfluencer. This aligns with previous research demonstrating that revealing intimate details of one's life (i.e., self-disclosure) enhances one's credibility (Leite & Baptista, 2022). Considering both visual and textual elements are crucial in conveying a compelling storyline (Feng et al., 2021), opting not to portray the child could compromise the trustworthiness and perceived expertise of momfluencers, giving rise to doubts about the child's existence. Additionally, as discussed by Wellman (2023), followers find it strange when someone claims expertise in a certain topic without providing evidence of their knowledge. On the other hand, oversharing intimate details by momfluencers about their children, as indicated in earlier research on regular social media influencers (Leite et al., 2022), can potentially harm the momfluencer's reputation as their followers may perceive it as inappropriate. In line with the social penetration theory, it is important for momfluencers to engage in self-disclosure that aligns with the context, and assess whether the context is appropriate for sharing or not (Altman & Taylor, 1973). In addition and as highlighted by existing research (Berryman & Kavka, 2018; Maares et al., 2020; Wellman et al., 2020), mothers evaluate momfluencers as more authentic when they act according to their true self and convey a sense of realness through sharing their imperfections. Hence, as children are perceived as a huge part of their lives, mothers expect momfluencers to portray their children online in order to perceive them as authentic and truthful. This aligns with earlier studies showing that higher self-disclosure increases authenticity (Nah, 2022) and is an often used strategy to enhance genuineness among followers (Jiang et al., 2022). Lastly, mothers in this study believe that the portrayal of children contributes to the intimate bond they experience with momfluencers and the way they are able to identify with them as a mother. These results can be explained by the social penetration theory as intimate self-

disclosure intensifies relationships and feelings of relatedness (Kim & Song, 2016). In sum, the portrayal of children in momfluencer content not only enhances the perceived credibility and authenticity momfluencers, but also fosters a personal connection with their audience. Considering these as key elements, featuring children becomes indispensable for momfluencers striving to attain online success (Hudders et al., 2020). Importantly, an exception is made for the portrayal of children in sponsored content. Consistent with previous research on the inclusion of children in sponsored content (Shamsian, 2018), mothers express strong disapproval of using children for commercial purposes, perceiving it as unethical. In contrast to the experimental findings of Buvár and Orosz (2023), where this disapproval was particularly evident for adult-related products, no such distinctions were noted in our study. Therefore, while child portrayal may enhance credibility, authenticity, and intimacy, this might not necessarily hold true for sponsored content.

Importantly, portraying children anonymously is considered as a form of portraying the child online, and the questioned mothers are positive towards anonymizing children in influencer content as they are highly aware of the risks related to influencer sharenting. As such, anonymizing children in momfluencer content should not have an influence on momfluencer's perceived credibility and authenticity, however, for some, could disrupt the intimate connection that mothers feel towards these momfluencers. This could be explained by the idea that when momfluencers decide to anonymize their children, they suggest that their followers are not allowed to view a certain aspect of their lives, potentially harming the sense of intimacy that their followers feel toward them (Leite & Baptista, 2022). In this regard, the interviewed mothers indicated that effectively communicating the reasons for anonymizing children can mitigate these potential negative feelings and help them understand the motives for this privacy-protective behaviors. Moreover, this practice may reduce the perceived distance that can arise when withholding personal information from followers. This

finding aligns with recent research by Walrave et al. (2023), who discussed that young parents engaged in mindful sharenting are expected to communicate their motives for adopting such practices, fostering better understanding among their social ties. Furthermore, the results show that such transparency would not only lead followers to perceive momfluencers as good mothers but could also influence changes in mothers' own sharenting behavior. This result finds support in the social learning theory, which posits that individuals learn new behaviors by observing and imitating others (Bandura & Walters, 1977). As such, influencers are perceived as cultural intermediaries, shaping social norms and influencing behavioral changes among their followers (Heřmanová, 2023). Mothers closely observe momfluencers and incorporate this acquired knowledge to shape their own behaviors and perceptions (Ouvrein, 2022). Frequent exposure to momfluencers employing anonymization techniques may lead to behavioral changes, with mothers adjusting their perceptions and modifying their own sharenting practices. Moreover, the strong identification that mothers have with momfluencers, given their shared motherhood status, could contribute to the emulation of attitudes and behaviors advocated by momfluencers (Ouvrein, 2022; Shan et al., 2020). Another potential explanation lies in the empathy-altruism hypothesis, proposing that feelings of empathy and compassion elicit altruistic motives (Batson et al., 2015). Research by Persson and Kajonius (2016), for instance, has demonstrated that empathy is strongly related to altruistic values. In this current study's context, it means that if momfluencers were to communicate about their concerns related to the online portrayal of their children, thereby underscoring their motives to anonymously portray their children, it could evoke empathy among their followers and, even more importantly, enhance altruistic behavior.

Lastly, mothers of young children generally hold positive attitudes towards anti-sharenting techniques, as defined by Autenrieth (2018), except when it comes to digitally processing the child. This reservation can be attributed to the prominence and artificiality of

computer-generated techniques, making viewers aware of deliberate secrecy. Consequently, this realization can impact the relationship dynamics and trust in the influencer (Bickart et al., 2015; Leite & Baptista, 2022). Besides, these covert techniques are sufficient to enhance celebrity capital only if they result in seemingly raw and amateurish content (i.e., calibrated amateurism; Abidin, 2017b) rather than scripted content in which the child is asked to do certain gestures to avoid exposing their identity.

Practical implications

In addition to its scientific relevance, this study holds important practical implications. As such, it is important to counter societal norms related to portraying children online, which could be achieved by (1) raising awareness among momfluencers, followers and platforms, and (2) implementing legislation.

First, enhancing awareness among momfluencers regarding the potential risks associated with featuring children online, as well as the available strategies to mitigate these risks, is necessary. Previous research has indicated that momfluencers are cognizant of the risks linked to influencer sharenting but struggle to withdraw due to concerns about damaging their celebrity capital (Archer, 2019; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Van den Abeele et al., 2023). This study challenges this assumption by revealing a middle ground through the implementation of anonymization techniques, which not only avoids negative feelings among followers but also safeguards the child's privacy. Workshops or training sessions organized by parenting organizations and/or governmental bodies could educate parents about these anti-sharenting techniques, emphasizing the importance of providing an explanation for practicing anti-sharenting. Beyond incorporating these techniques, parents should also develop a sense of reluctance when sharing personal information about their child. As outlined by Walrave et al. (2023) in their definition of mindful sharenting, reducing the potential negative effects of sharenting involves avoiding to publish identifying information. Additionally, public

awareness campaigns targeting parents could foster a better understanding of the importance of safeguarding children's online privacy, ultimately enhancing acceptance of anti-sharenting techniques. Platforms should also be made aware of these concerns, encouraging the implementation of features that promote the anonymous portrayal of children.

Secondly, prior research from in-depth interviews with momfluencers revealed that advertisers often request momfluencers to include their children in sponsored content (Van den Abeele et al., 2023). However, aligning with previous studies (Buvár & Orosz, 2023; Shamsian, 2018), this study reveals negative attitudes among momfluencers' followers toward the portrayal of children in sponsored content. Advertisers should, thus, be cautious when featuring children in influencer content and discourage parents from doing so. Policy instances should provide advertisers with guidelines, increasing awareness about the risks associated with influencer sharenting and urging them to minimize the involvement of children in influencer collaborations.

Lastly, as indicated by many other authors (e.g., Haley, 2020; Steinberg, 2016; van der Hof et al., 2019; Yates, 2023) existing legislation should implement stricter rules to protect children's online privacy and general well-being. The current study acknowledges that children are often portrayed in their mothers' (sponsored) influencer content. Present legislation places the responsibility on parents to safeguard their children's online privacy when producing content online, without acknowledging that children could be exploited by their parents (Morris, 2023). This conflict of interest could have significant consequences for the child depicted (Steinberg, 2016). The government could provide guidelines, encouraging influencer parents to portray their child anonymously online. Particularly concerning commercial content, stricter regulations should be implemented to address child labor issues (van der Hof et al., 2019; Yates, 2023).

Limitations and future research

As with all research, the current study has limitations. Firstly, the use of self-selection raises the possibility that our sample primarily consisted of highly privacy-conscious mothers. To address this, future experimental research should consider mothers' privacy awareness and how it shapes their attitudes towards anti-sharenting techniques. Secondly, it is crucial to recognize that participants' current beliefs might not necessarily align with their real-life behaviors. There is a likelihood that, in practice, they might react more negatively to anti-sharenting techniques than they anticipated. Moreover, certain attitudes and feelings may surface unconsciously. For example, mothers may have expressed negative attitudes toward the commercial use of children when consciously reflecting on the matter, yet in reality, they may find themselves drawn to the charm of cute children's faces. Therefore, future research conducted in real-life settings is essential. Third, participation was open to mothers with multiple children and/or children of varying ages. It is important to acknowledge that potential differences in their experiences and overall consumption of momfluencer content may exist. Therefore, further research is recommended to delve deeper into understanding potential distinctions between mothers with younger and older children, as well as those with varying numbers of children. Additionally, this study did not take into account the participants' socioeconomic status, nor the cultural and societal factors that could influence their perspectives and responses. Future research could examine the differences across different cultural and social contexts. Fourth, this study solely focused on the utilization of anti-sharenting techniques, representing just one facet of mindful sharenting, as outlined by Walrave et al. (2023). Future research should delve into the necessity of sharing textual personal information about the child to establish credibility, authenticity, and intimacy. Finally, it is recommended to conduct experimental research that explores the impact of communicating the reasons behind employing anti-sharenting techniques by momfluencers.

This research could delve into how such communication might enhance their perceived expertise, authenticity, and intimacy with their followers.

Conclusion

This study uncovers the complex dynamics of child presence in momfluencer content. While the portrayal of children is essential for enhancing momfluencers' expertise, authenticity, and intimacy, it can be accomplished while safeguarding the child's privacy through anti-sharenting techniques. Transparent communication about these choices is crucial for fostering meaningful relationships. Such communication not only deepens connections but also has the potential to enhance perceptions of good motherhood, resulting in behavioral changes among followers.

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Appendix

Anti-sharenting techniques (Autenrieth, 2018)

The disguised child	
The faraway child	

The parted child



The child from behind



The digitally processed child



