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**Momfluencers as mere advertising vehicles or sources for support? A qualitative study on the experiences of mothers with the breastfeeding related content of momfluencers**

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**Momfluencers as mere advertising vehicles or sources for support? A qualitative study on the experiences of mothers with the breastfeeding related content of momfluencers**

Momfluencers play a significant role in the lives of brand-new mothers. They are considered niche social media influencers (SMIs), credible parenting information sources and are known to exert tremendous influence on their large number of followers. While extensive research has scrutinized influencer marketing, a noteworthy gap exists in understanding how momfluencers can be employed to encourage pro-social behaviors. This study focuses on breastfeeding behavior, a prominent topic on momfluencers’ profiles. Despite the clear guidelines on breastfeeding provided by the WHO, global rates remain alarmingly low. While research shows potential in social media content to encourage breastfeeding, insights lack on influencers’ role in encouraging breastfeeding among mothers. To address these gaps, our qualitative exploratory study conducted 15 in-depth interviews among breastfeeding mothers who follow momfluencers. Through the lens of social cognitive and social comparison theory, we aimed to explore the experiences of mothers with momfluencers’ breastfeeding content.

Keywords: momfluencers; social media; breastfeeding; qualitative research; social marketing

**Introduction**

The transition into motherhood is characterized by feelings of joy and pride, but also anxiety, uncertainty and fatigue (Barclay et al., 1997; Ouvrein, 2022). During this uncertain period, contemporary mothers often seek for support, information and a sense of community on social media (Frey et al., 2022). An important topic for which mothers regularly consult social media is breastfeeding (Baker & Yang, 2018). While the WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding during an infant’s first 6 months and its continuation as part of infants’ diets until 2 years and beyond, these guidelines are seldomly adhered to (WHO, 2023). Distinct barriers, such as lack of knowledge and pain (Patil et al., 2020), the pervasive influence of misleading advertising of the commercial milk industry (Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2023), the cultural non-normativity of breastfeeding in Western society (Tomori, 2022) and more, collectively contribute to the low breastfeeding rates. However, research indicates that social media can play an important role in supporting and encouraging mothers in their breastfeeding journey (Orchard & Nicholls, 2020).

Momfluencers, the most persuasive actors on these platforms, are seen as role models and peers for other mothers due to their personal and authentic parenting content, including detailed, real-time insight into their personal breastfeeding journey (Egmose et al., 2022; Pilime & Jewett, 2023). Nevertheless, the current literature on momfluencers in relation to breastfeeding is very limited. Only two studies, both content analyses, touched upon the topic of breastfeeding and momfluencers and indicated that breastfeeding content is frequently discussed on their profiles (Egmose et al., 2022; Pilime & Jewett, 2023). However, there are no insights on how mothers interpret momfluencers' breastfeeding content and what influence this has on their own breastfeeding journeys. Additionally, influencer marketing research is predominantly focused on the commercial impact and lacks insights into how SMIs can be employed to encourage prosocial behaviour (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021). Furthermore, a strong "scientific motherhood perspective" prevails in both academic research and practice, recommending that mothers need to learn from science and medicine (Foss, 2017). Hence, this qualitative study aims to address these research gaps by offering insights into how mothers perceive and interact with breastfeeding content shared by momfluencers. It delves into the influence momfluencers exert on mothers' personal expectations, experiences, and norms regarding breastfeeding, utilizing Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory and Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory as theoretical frameworks. These insights provides crucial information for policy makers and social marketers to collaborate with SMIs and launch campaigns to encourage breastfeeding or other pro-social behavior.

**Literature review**

***Momfluencers and their (breastfeeding) content***

Momfluencers, a subset of social media influencers (SMIs), actively share a wide range of personal experiences, opinions, relevant information, tips and advice within the niche of parenting (Hudders & Lou, 2023). They cultivate their expertise among mothers through their lived experiences rather dan professional qualifications (Wellman, 2023). The representation of their content varies significantly, spanning from idealized depictions of motherhood, characterized by an inherent positivity bias (Coyne, McDaniel, & Stockdale, 2017; Ouvrein, 2022) to more honest and realistic portrayals aimed at challenging societal ideals about motherhood (Chee, Capper, & Muurlink, 2023; Egmose et al., 2022). However, there is a notable gap in understanding how momfluencers represent breastfeeding content. Even though breastfeeding is a frequently discussed topic on momfluencers’ profiles (Chee, Capper, & Muurlink, 2023), only two studies looked into the breastfeeding content of momfluencers. These studies indicated that momfluencers encourage their followers to breastfeed, emphasize its benefits for child rest and sleep patterns and frequently feature sponsored posts endorsing breastfeeding accessories (Egmose et al., 2022; Pilime & Jewett, 2023). Yet, there is a lack of insights into how mothers interpret this breastfeeding content and the significance they attribute to sponsored posts. This led to the overarching research question of how mothers perceive breastfeeding content shared by momfluencers.

***The influence of momfluencers***

Momfluencers are seen as role models and peers for other mothers and wield a significant impact on the decisions, attitudes, and behaviors of their followers (Mertens & Beuckels, 2023). This could be explained by the social cognitive theory (SCT) that states that people learn observationally through interaction with their environment and role models, and is often employed within social marketing research (Bandura, 2001). Vicariously learning from others is influenced by two central concepts: self-efficacy and outcome expectancies (Bandura, 2001). Outcome expectations pertain to an individual's anticipation of the consequences associated with a specific behavior (Bandura, 2001). Self-efficacy, on the other hand, denotes an individual's belief in their capability to perform a particular behavior in a given situation (Bandura, 2001). Within the context of breastfeeding, maternal self-efficacy reflects a mother's confidence in successfully breastfeeding her child, while outcome expectancy encapsulates her perception of the advantages or disadvantages of breastfeeding. In the context of breastfeeding education and support, research already demonstrated that successful testimonies of other mothers on social media have positive effects on other mothers’ breastfeeding practices (Jin, Phua, & Lee, 2015). Additionally, two studies indicate that SCT is an appropriate theoretical framework to understand why mothers use online social media to improve their breastfeeding outcomes (Black, McLaughlin, & Giles, 2020; Edwards, Jepson, & McInnes, 2018). A second theory that helps us to understand the impact of momfluencers is the social comparison theory. This theory states that people experience an intrinsic need to compare themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). Some studies show that mothers compare themselves to momfluencers in both positive and negative ways (Egmose et al., 2022; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022). Comparison with others can be done through upward comparison, downward comparison or horizontal comparison (Festinger, 1954). Upward comparison involves benchmarking oneself against an ideal image (Festinger, 1954). Applied to mothers, they compare themselves to momfluencers whom they perceive as their ideal image of a 'good' mother. A horizontal comparison occurs when someone views someone else as equal (Festinger, 1954). Applied to this research, this implies that mothers compare themselves to momfluencers with whom they can identify with. Current research primarily focuses on the adverse effects of upward comparison with momfluencers (Coyne, McDaniel, & Stockdale, 2017; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022; Moujaes & Verrier, 2020). However, a gap exists in understanding how mothers engage in comparisons or identification with breastfeeding content from momfluencers.

In summary, there are no insights regarding the impact of momfluencers on mothers' personal expectations and experiences related to breastfeeding within the framework of the SCT and the social comparison theory. Based on the literature review, the following research questions are formulated:

RQ1: How do mothers perceive momfluencers’ breastfeeding content?

RQ2: How does breastfeeding content from momfluencers affect mothers' personal expectations, self-efficacy and experiences related to breastfeeding?

**Method**

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to delve into areas that lack comprehensive understanding, as described by Mortelmans (2018). A semi-structured interview guide, encompassing five main topics—relationship with momfluencers, breastfeeding expectations, breastfeeding experiences, information and challenges, and breastfeeding norms—was utilized. During the interview sessions, participants were presented with several screenshots of posts featuring momfluencers’ breastfeeding content to facilitate reflection. A total of 15 interviews (10 physical and 5 online) were conducted with mothers in March and April 2023. All interviews, lasting between 27 to 56 minutes, were recorded through MS Teams.

Purposive sampling techniques were employed, ensuring the selection of respondents based on predetermined criteria to explore the research questions in depth (Roose & Meuleman, 2021). Criteria included respondents being mothers, actively following a minimum of three momfluencers on Instagram, and having engaged in breastfeeding within the past two years. All participants were recruited through Instagram and Facebook calls or the researcher's personal network. Relevant demographic data, such as duration of breastfeeding, age, and number of children, were collected and presented in the respondent table 1 [Table 1 near here].

Thematic analysis, following Boyatzis' (1998) principles, was employed for data analysis. A hybrid approach, combining inductive and deductive strategies, guided the development of themes and codes. The researcher familiarized herself with the data by transcribing the interviews and constructing a code tree in NVivo, aligning with the research questions and literature review. Subsequently, the interviews were coded based on predetermined codes and new codes introduced for data not fitting existing categories. This process ensured comprehensive coding of all interviews. Six overarching themes emerges from the analysis. Please note that due to the 10-page limit, we are constrained to provide a brief description of the results and discussion. This limitation hinders a complete representation of the depth and richness of our qualitative findings.

**Results**

***Following behavior of mothers.*** The majority of mothers indicated that they had not started following any or only a few momfluencers during their pregnancy. The main reasons for this was that at the time they were pregnant, they were not yet into breastfeeding, could not yet identify with such content and/or were not particularly interested in the experiences shared by momfluencers. At the moment they became a mother, they start actively seeking for parenting information on momfluencers’ profiles and could recognize themselves in certain breastfeeding stories that occasionally were shared. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that these mothers' expectations surrounding breastfeeding were not yet influenced by momfluencers. For example, Caroline explained: *“No, not really. Because I actually wasn't focused yet on breastfeeding during that time. My questions arose when I started breastfeeding myself. That's when I actively started looking for momfluencers.”*

***Breastfeeding representation on momfluencers’ profiles.*** Mothers highlight a discernible shift in the content of momfluencers from previous trends where only picture-perfect moments of breastfeeding were shared to more honest and realistic breastfeeding content where they depict various aspects of breastfeeding. However, despite the increasing realistic breastfeeding topics, mothers indicate that the shared images are still highly romanticized. For example, Elise said: *“When I look at Lieve Van de Weghe now, she's sitting there in her armchair with clean clothes on. Yes, that's not... or well, it certainly wasn't always the case with me. It was more like picture 2 or so, or that Eva Daeleman with your bare belly, right?”.*

The narratives accompanying the glamorized photos offer nuance into momfluencers' breastfeeding stories. Mothers express appreciation for the blend of honesty and polished content, particularly when complemented with a personal story. These findings underscore that mothers do not only value visual content but also the narrative conveyed through the photo as explained by Nathalie: *“Um... I think it's a bit idealized, but I also appreciate it, and I think that's more and more, that people are more honest but still with a nice photo. You're not going to put a picture of your very worst night on it. But I think they do tell more honestly and that is appreciated.”.*

***Sponsored content.*** A considerable number of mothers noted that momfluencers frequently share sponsored content. Some mothers express strong irritation about the abundance of sponsored content while others find it intriguing to discover new products that are valuable for them. In the last case, sponsored posts serve as a source of inspiration, prompting them to seek additional information about the products. For example, Silke indicated: *:* *“... I’m getting influenced by these influencers anyway, because they just know what I need. So, I'm not super suspicious, because I believe these influencers wouldn’t recommend products they don't genuinely support. However, I do remain extra vigilant about my susceptibility, especially when I notice that something is sponsored. It also depends on how they present it because sometimes they say something like ‘I've personally used it and became a fan for such and such reason' and then I feel okay. But at other times it feels like pure commerce, and I struggle to delineate the line."* Consequently, such endorsements are perceived not merely as conventional advertising but as authentic reflections of momfluencers' genuine experiences with the product.

***Momfluencers as sources of support.*** Momfluencers share their personal breastfeeding experiences, detailing the challenges they encounter such as insufficient milk production, allergies, nipple cracks, and more, while offering tips and information gleaned from their own journeys. Mothers value the sharing of these difficulties and personal experiences, finding validation in the acknowledgment that breastfeeding is not always effortless and that they are not alone. Sara expressed: *“That is also the nice thing about it that I see that I am not alone with my struggles. Um, that they have their good moments, but also their difficult moments, and that is also the case here. That we know that we are all going through the same thing.”*. Furthermore, momfluencers' breastfeeding content positively influences mothers' breastfeeding experiences when they can identify with momfluencers' breastfeeding stories. Recognizing themselves in content portraying challenges, intimate bonding, coping with negative reactions, sleepless nights, and the chaos of motherhood fosters a sense of support and empowerment in their breastfeeding journey.

***Momfluencers as role models.*** Mothers attach great importance to these tips and information as they originate from the firsthand experiences of other mothers. Mothers assess how pertinent these insights are to their situation and consciously or unconsciously apply these practical tips in their daily lives. René said: “*When \*\*\* had chickenpox, I came across a mom influencer suggesting the use of breast milk in the bath as an effective remedy for healing the wounds. So, just before Christmas when he had it, and I still had breastmilk in my freezer, I thought, why not? So, I added milk in the bath and those are kinds of insights work for me. It's also about personal preferences and what you find valuable from your own experiences.”.*

Moreover, breastfeeding content of momfluencers can also positively impact mothers' self-efficacy. Mothers reported that momfluencers inspire them to persist with breastfeeding despite the challenges. The honest sharing of personal breastfeeding stories by momfluencers makes mothers believe that they, too, can overcome difficulties and successfully breastfeed. Ana explained: *“Um yes, for example both children couldn't tolerate it if I ate dairy or cheese while breastfeeding. There were moments I considered stopping because it was challenging to avoid such foods. But then, [Flemish Momfluencer] faced the same issue, so not being able to consume any cheese or dairy products. When she wrote about the difficulty but expressed her determination to persevere, I thought, ‘yes, she can do it to’.* *So, in that way, I felt I could do it as well.".* Thus, through observation, mothers learn from momfluencers and gain more confidence in their own breastfeeding abilities (e.g. self-efficacy). Consequently, these positive influences on mothers' experiences encourage prolonged breastfeeding.

***Pitfalls of momfluencers’ breastfeeding content***. Although most mothers in our study tended to engage in horizontal comparisons with momfluencers, there were also mothers who engaged in upward comparisons with momfluencers. They perceived that breastfeeding is easy and naturally for momfluencers and reflect these experiences on themselves. This leads to the belief that their own experiences fall short of the ideal image of breastfeeding, generating negative feelings. For instance, Elise said: *“... The recurring message of 'oh, I've been breastfeeding for so long' always comes up. But, for me it hasn't been obvious. Messages like 'I'm glad I didn't give up' or 'it has been worth the journey' sometimes make me reflect: oh yes, I quit breastfeeding with my son at ten weeks and now with \*\*\* at six weeks, and I wonder, why didn’t it work for me or am I not as strong as those influencers”.* Upward comparison is especially prevalent among mothers who have breastfed for a shorter duration than desired. This quote also illustrates momfluencers' breastfeeding content's potential negative impact on mothers' breastfeeding self-efficacy.Momfluencers often state that they experience difficulties but always persevere for the sake of their child. This message causes mothers to question their own breastfeeding abilities and believe less in themselves.

**Discussion & Conclusion**

Momfluencers have become an integral part of modern motherhood. The breastfeeding content of momfluencers is perceived as a blend of honesty and polished content, a phenomenon known as 'calibrated amateurism' (Abidin, 2017). Additionally, mothers draw inspiration from the commercial breastfeeding content of momfluencers if their posts are covered with a personal story. However, the practice of weaving personal narratives around sponsored products is a common technique in influencer marketing aimed at persuading followers (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021), underscoring the need for greater awareness among parents regarding persuasive strategies employed by SMIs, aligning with the study of Ahn (2022).

Furthermore, breastfeeding content of momfluencers typically exerts a positive influence on mothers' breastfeeding experiences, offering relatable insights, practical tips, and a sense of support, thereby enhancing self-efficacy. These findings resonates with previous studies exploring breastfeeding support within Facebook groups (Black, McLaughlin, & Giles, 2020; Morse & Brown, 2021). By providing hands-on information and experiences, momfluencers counterbalance the scientific motherhood perspective (Foss, 2017). Additionally, mothers predominantly engage in horizontal comparisons with momfluencers who present an authentic portrayal of breastfeeding, which aligns with findings from previous studies (Chee, Capper, & Muurlink, 2023; Egmose et al., 2022). However, some mothers engage in upward comparisons, especially when idealized content is showed, generating negative feelings and lower self-efficacy. These findings align with previous studies, indicating that upward comparisons with momfluencers can evoke feelings of jealousy, anxiety, and stress, ultimately diminishing self-efficacy (Coyne, McDaniel, & Stockdale, 2017; Moujaes & Verrier, 2020; Ouvrein, 2022).

In conclusion, while momfluencers generally have a positive impact on breastfeeding practices, it is essential to acknowledge and address adverse effects. Future research should explore how momfluencers can serve as digital agents to support mothers in their breastfeeding journey while mitigating the negative outcomes. Moreover, the results of the current study can shape social marketing strategies aimed at supporting and encouraging breastfeeding among mothers trough SMIs.

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***Tables***

Table 1: *demographic date of the mothers who participated in this study.*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| pseudonym | Age of the mother | Amount of children | number of months breastfeeding |
| Bea | 30  | 2 | 9 months and 18 months |
| René | 29  | 1 | 9 to 10 months |
| Ana | 34  | 2  | 7 months and 5 months |
| Caroline | 26  | 1  | 9 months |
| Elise | 32  | 2 | 10 weeks - 6 weeks |
| Eveline  | 32  | 1 | 8,5 months |
| Femke | 28  | 1 | 3 months |
| Laurien | 33  | 1 | 6 weeks to date |
| Lise | 29  | 1 | 10 months |
| Nathalie | 37  | 1 | 7 months |
| Sara | 33  | 3 | 9 months, 1 year & 2 months to date |
| Saskia | 32  | 1 | 10 months to date |
| Shary | 31  | 2 | 8 months & 18 months |
| Silke | 29  | 1 | 5 months |
| Yentl |  | 1 | 9 months |