CHALLENGING THE RULES OF INFLUENCER MARKETING: EMERGING SENSITIVITIES AROUND CHILDREN'S PRESENCE IN FAMILY INFLUENCERS PROFILES

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Theoretical background

In the context of neoliberalism and the creator economy, influencers routinely disclose on social media elements of their lives that range from public to deeply intimate (Erin Duffy et al., 2024; Scolere et al., 2018). By doing so, they construct a coherent narrative through organic content (that is, non-sponsored material forming part of everyday storytelling), which enhances their perceived authenticity and relatability to audiences (Jorge et al., 2022). This narrative also underpins their commercial value: by fostering strong emotional connections with followers, influencers can secure paid partnerships (i.e.: sponsored content) with brands to promote products and services or even to launch their own brands. The success and effectiveness of this commercial strategy are recognized as being based on their knowledge, expertise, attractiveness, affinity with users, and earned credibility (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). The opportunity to earn a living, either fully or partially, through social media storytelling, has led to the emergence of new forms of entrepreneurs, commonly referred to as 'mumpreneurs' (Archer, 2019a, 2019b) or family influencers (Abidin, 2017). This development has enabled mothers and parents to cope with the precarity and uncertainty of returning to work after childbirth, achieve a better work–life balance, and access social and emotional support (Locatelli, 2017; Robinson et al., 2019). As part of this narrative, they share elements of their daily lives, including depictions of their children. This entails significant risks, such as the commodification of intimacy, the excessive exposure of childhood, and the constant pressure to produce content to remain visible in social media feeds, which are shaped by algorithmic selection (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Van Den Abeele et al., 2024).

Within the European context, the introduction of the GDPR in 2016, combined with ongoing efforts by regulatory authorities to safeguard children and a growing public awareness of the risks associated with social media platforms, appears to have encouraged greater caution among both influencers and users regarding the protection of family life, privacy, and intimacy (Van den Abeele et al., 2024). In Italy—the country in which this study was conducted—an active debate persists on this issue, with legislative proposals pending discussion in Parliament and advocacy initiatives underway (Terre des Hommes Italia, 2025). While research on sharenting exists (Mascheroni et al., 2023), there remains a notable gap in studies specifically addressing family influencers.

In light of this background, the present study seeks to investigate how mother and family influencers navigate the imperative to portray their children in organic and sponsored content, and to identify potential forms of resistance both among influencers and their potential audiences.

Methodology

The study adopted a multi-method approach to address various dimensions of the research question and to mitigate potential biases inherent in each method.
We conducted extensive analysis of content shared by a selected group of top Italian influencers focusing the ratio of organic and paid content and the presence of children. This analysis stemmed from a wider research project carried on in 2024 by IAP Italia to monitor the compliance of advertising contents (IAP, 2024; IAP & ALMED, 2024). Family influencers were selected with theoretical sampling encompassing these dimensions: Italian creators focused mainly on family-related topics; follower counts ranging from 20,000 to 5 million to comprehend different types of influencers; and, where applicable, a business activity related to family or parenthood. The final sample comprised 34 profiles. We analyzed content posted on Instagram and TikTok between March and May 2024 (N = 4,697), distinguishing organic and paid content and assessing the visual presence of children. Additionally, we examined sponsored content in detail to understand how children were visually represented.
We also administered a questionnaire to one of the largest and most relevant Italian digital communities of mothers (FattoreMamma), to explore attitudes toward maternity storytelling, children's presence, and the work of family/mom influencers. The questionnaire targeted mothers with at least a child aged 0-5 years (482 respondents). While not representative of the general population, the survey offers valuable insights into a key demographic of mothers—both influencers and non-influencers—, who may actively use social media to seek information, interact, and engage with influencers' content.
Finally, we conducted in-depth interviews with nine mothers: six who actively share content on their social media profiles and volunteered after completing the questionnaire, and three influencers who deliberately chose not to feature their children. They were selected using purposive sampling to capture alternative perspectives on the issue (Jorge et al., 2022).
All data were processed in compliance with GDPR standards and the AoIR Ethics Guidelines (Ess & AoIR, 2012; Franzke et al., 2020).

Main results and discussion

Given space constraints, this paper focuses mainly on content and interview analysis. Findings from the Instagram and TikTok content analysis reveal considerable variation in the presence of children across posts. Children appear in 41.27% (N = 1,713) of organic content and 24.18% (N = 132) of paid content, with an overall average of 39.87% (N = 1,845).
The visual presence of children is therefore substantial across the sample and not confined to occasional appearances. The in-depth analysis of the 132 sponsored content featuring children yields further insights. In nearly half of these posts (44.70%, N= 59), children are actively involved in the storytelling associated with the sponsorship and in the production of the content. Children under three years of age appear in 36.36% (N = 48) of sponsored posts, and in almost half of the posts promoting infancy-related products (56.25%, N = 9). Additionally, more than one child is featured in 36.36% (N = 48) of these posts. Notably, the data revealed an almost complete absence of anti-sharenting practices.

Among the most interesting data from the questionnaire are the fact that respondents reported publishing photos of their children primarily as part of using Instagram as a personal diary, consistent with previous research (Locatelli, 2017). Furthermore, approximately one-third (29.6%, N = 143) expressed a desire to leverage social networks professionally, underscoring the aspirational dimension of influencer work.

In-depth interviews highlighted a nuanced and complex approach on the topic. Some mothers expressed concerns regarding both the present and future privacy of their children, opting either not to feature them at all or avoiding potentially sensitive situations (e.g., during bathing or while wearing swimwear). They acknowledged the usefulness of engaging with influencers during pregnancy or the early years of their children's lives but did not necessarily consider children's presence essential to influencer storytelling. While opinions on children's inclusion in commercial content were mixed, many participants regarded it as acceptable if managed responsibly, ensuring that the most intimate aspects of family life remained private. The three influencers who chose not to share images of their children offered particularly valuable insights. They described their social media presence and community relationships as supportive during challenging times. They expressed overall satisfaction with their decision of not sharing their children's pictures, despite acknowledging drawbacks such as lost sponsorships where brands explicitly required those. They recognized both the potential privacy threats associated with exposing their online and the well-intentioned—albeit considered sometimes naïve—approach of those who do share such content. They also emphasized their awareness of platform algorithms, supposing that posts featuring children tend to receive greater visibility.

Overall, the findings point to an ongoing debate—whether implicit or explicit—about the personal and professional implications of sharing children online. Notably, even among influencers whose storytelling centers on family life, featuring children is not always

considered essential. In some cases, privacy and intimacy are prioritized over the economic benefits of maintaining a public profile. This trend suggests increasing maturity within influencer marketing and highlights the potential impact of institutional awareness campaigns addressing the risks of minors' online visibility.

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