

# **Social Media Influencers as New Agents on Parenthood? A Systematic Literature Review of Parent Influencer Research and a Future Research Agenda**

Emma Beuckels<sup>a\*</sup>, Ralf De Wolf<sup>b\*</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Department of Communication Sciences, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium – Center for Persuasive Communication*

*<sup>b</sup>Department of Communication Sciences, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium – Imec-mict-Ugent*

*\* Both authors contributed equally to this work and serve as co-first authors.*

Emma Beuckels, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 41, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

E: [emma.beuckels@ugent.be](mailto:emma.beuckels@ugent.be)

# **Social Media Influencers as New Agents on Parenthood? A Systematic Literature Review of Parent Influencer Research and a Future Research Agenda**

Parents frequently turn to social media and blogs to find information, advice, and support on parenting. In recent years, social media influencers and specifically ‘parent influencers’ have become prominent figures in the realm of parenthood. The latter group capitalizes on their family lives, skilfully integrates product placements, and openly shares their daily experiences. Parent influencers are believed to have an exceptionally influential voice, but a comprehensive understanding of how they actually shape parental expectations, identities and well-being is missing. Using the five-step methodology of Khan et al. (2022) and Stern’s framework (1994) we carried out a systematic literature review (N=96), so to map and understand the emerging field on parent influencers. The results show how disproportionality more research has been devoted to mothers, mom influencers and discourses on motherhood. In addition, we find a lack of diversity within the parent influencer landscape, encompassing both content creators and the reception of the content. Finally, the conceptualization and operationalization of parental wellbeing is underdeveloped, and there is a notable absence of empirical evidence and impact. In the discussion, we highlight these and other shortcomings and provide a future research agenda.

Keywords: Social media; influencers; parent influencers; systematic review; parenthood

## **Introduction**

Parenting has faced significant challenges in the past decade. A great number of parents, especially in Western countries like France, the United States and Belgium, experience physical and emotional fatigue leading to severe consequences such as parental burnout (e.g. Roskam et al., 2022, Schmidt et al., 2022). Especially the post-partum period, and the first years after receiving a child evokes strong emotions among parents (Archer, 2019b). This phase is often signified with insecurity and social isolation (Widarsson et al., 2013), whereby a large number of parents turn to social media, to find information, advice, support and to release some of their stress (Archer, 2019b). In the last few years, especially parent bloggers or social media influencers (further referred to as parent influencers) have made their appearance. .

Parent (and mostly mom) influencers first made an appearance on blogs as non-fictional writers about their everyday lives as a form of digital self-representation (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). However, their content and popularity soon attracted the attention of brands and marketers, swiftly transforming them from hobbyists to entrepreneurs, performing affective and emotional labor through their blogs (Mäkinen, 2021). Today, parent influencers primarily utilize social media platforms to connect with their audience, capitalizing on the ease of crafting engaging and concise content, and constructing a large and devoted follower base.

The rise of parent influencers cannot be disconnected from larger societal trends. Contemporary Western societies under the influence of neoliberal ideologies have fostered a significant amplification of expectations in both the realms of parenthood and employment (Mäkinen, 2021). The workforce now places unprecedented demands on individuals (Dejours et al., 2018), while parenting is governed by a set of norms

emphasizing the cultivation of self-reliant, productive, and socially well-adapted children (Geinger et al., 2014). This context makes a parent influencer status increasingly attractive, as it allows parents to earn revenues while spending time with their child(ren) (Mäkinen, 2021). Notably, Instagram is the preferred social media channel of brands to invest in influencer marketing campaigns (MarketingHub, 2022), and is also the most popular among the age group (25-34 years old) to which most new parents belong (Statista, 2023). Hence, the content of parent influencers quickly seeped into various social media platforms, with Instagram in the lead.

Studies tackling this subject are providing in-depth insights into, inter alia, parent influencers' motivations (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017), hegemonic discourses (Lehto, 2020) and effects on the followers (Egmose et al., 2022). The topic is covered in widely divergent research domains (e.g. health promotion, media cultures, medical and pedagogical studies), but a comprehensive understanding on parental influencers and how they truly impact parental expectations, identities, and well-being is still lacking. To date two review papers exist. In the following sections, we will first provide a detailed examination of these reviews, which will serve as crucial references for the identification of research gaps and represent the foundation for the present study's advancement. Importantly, both existing review papers are situated in the field of 'Midwifery and Maternal Health' and 'Feminist Media Studies' research. Hereafter we present our systematic literature study in which we analyze 96 articles on parent influencers. Recognizing the profound significance attached to this topic by various scholars in the field (e.g. Abidin, 2017; Germic et al., 2021), we believe there is a strong need for a more comprehensive and encompassing overview of research on parent influencers and social media, and to further acknowledge its interdisciplinarity.

### **Situating the Current Review Study on Parent Influencers**

Scholarly interest in parent influencers has witnessed a notable rise in recent years due to the growing propensity of parents to actively engage in digital spaces. Nevertheless, through our systematic literature search, only two review papers dedicated to summarizing the existing body of research on this subject could be identified. A first non-systematic review of Wegener et al. (2022) discusses how negotiations and internalizations of motherhood shifted from private to public spheres due to influencers' public staging of motherhood through content on their social media profiles. Situated in Feminist Media Studies and employing a social constructivist framework, this paper assesses the existing body of research to identify the challenges of the public staging of motherhood, develops a theoretical framing and points out to interesting avenues for future research. The second review paper in the field of Midwifery and Maternal Health is the one of Chee et al. (2023). Through a systematic literature search they assess the impact of mom influencers on the emotions, thoughts and behaviors of their followers. Based on an in-depth examination of 17 academic articles, they conclude that mom influencers can both empower and harm pregnant and new parents.

This paucity of comprehensive reviews underscores the relative novelty of the field and highlights the need for further academic endeavors to consolidate and analyze the growing body of literature on parent influencers. For instance, Wegener et al. (2022) solely focus on mothers as creators and consumers of professionalized social media content. This emphasis on mothers may be driven by the observation that particularly mothers adopted influencer careers, promoting neoliberal values through their profiles,

often with a consumerist agenda. Nonetheless, recent studies have indicated an increasing popularity of dad influencers (Campana et al., 2020; Scheibling & Milkie, 2023).

Although the literature review of Chee et al. (2023) did incorporate studies on parenting in general, this review paper exclusively focused on the perspectives of the audiences. For the current study we carried out a systematic literature search on Scopus and Web of Science in May 2023, and analyzed a total of 96 papers. In order to fully understand the field, this assimilation of research was subdivided by insights related to a) parents as sources of professionalized social media content, b) the content created and the discourses currently being disseminated by parent influencers and c) the impact of the aforementioned (a,b) on their audiences. This classification was inspired by a previous literature review in the field of Influencer Marketing (Hudders et al., 2021), and the Revised Communication Model for Advertising of (Stern, 1994) and guided the research questions of the current study. It should be noted that we consider both research on parent social media influencers and parent bloggers. Pioneering studies predominantly revolved around parent 'bloggers,' who have played a pivotal role in shaping the influencer marketing landscape. By encompassing research on both parent influencers and bloggers, we strive to provide a comprehensive understanding. The latter approach enables us to bridge the past and present, illuminating the dynamic nature of influencer marketing and its enduring impact on consumer behavior and digital culture. We present the following research questions. Each research question is divided into two parts. The initial part concentrates on a quantitative description, while the latter part provides a more qualitative description.

**RQ1a.** In what manner and to what degree have studies explored the motivations that drive parent influencers to participate in this practice?

**RQ1b.** What are the motivations of parent influencers to engage in the creation of content for social media platforms?

**RQ2a.** In what manner and to what degree have researchers investigated the content and discourses disseminated by parent influencers targeted at parents?

**RQ2b.** What specific content and discourses are being disseminated by parent influencers targeted at parents?

**RQ3a.** In what manner and to what degree have researchers explored the impact of parent influencers on parents and their experiences?

**RQ3b.** What is the observed impact of parent influencers on parents and their experiences?

## **Methodology**

Our review follows the five-step methodology of Khan et al. (2022), consisting of the 1) research question formulation (cf. above), 2) Identifying relevant literature, 3) paper eligibility and quality assessment, 4) summarizing the findings and finally 5) interpretation and reporting of findings.

First, based on a preliminary non-systematic literature review, we described the free-from research questions above, for which we aim to seek an answer within this study (step 1). Further, the identification of relevant academic literature, a similar search approach was utilized as in previous systematic literature reviews (e.g. Beuckels et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021). Given the fact that many different words are used to describe parent influencers

(e.g. mommy bloggers, mum influencers, Instadads, etc.), we used an extensive set of keywords for the search. The final search string was:

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(( (parent* OR mother* OR father* OR maternal OR mom* OR dad* OR paternal OR pregnancy OR conception OR postnatal OR prenatal OR family OR kid* OR child* ) AND ( *fluencer* OR blog* OR commercialization ) ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , "English" ) ).
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The second and third step of Khan's process were completed twice, as we performed two rounds of literature searches on two different databases. Initially, we made use of the Scopus database, as it represents the largest and most comprehensive database of indexed peer-reviewed literature (Bhimani et al., 2019). In the preliminary search, we gathered a total of 581 papers, each subjected to scrutiny through the evaluation of abstracts and titles (step 2a). During this phase, one researcher performed an eligibility and quality assessment based on a screening of the titles and abstracts (step 3a). To guarantee the quality of the papers, we only included peer reviewed journal articles and excluded conference contributions and books or book chapters (Shen & Ho, 2020). In cases of duplicates between the two databases, the selections from Scopus were retained. A final inclusion criterion was that the articles had to discuss the topic of parent influencers (including mom-, dad-, and family influencers). Any uncertainties or questionable cases were deliberated with a second researcher, leading to either their exclusion or retention through mutual consensus. Based on this, 479 papers were excluded—either due to duplication in the list or their lack of relevance to parent influencers. Besides, 26 papers were excluded due to being in formats other than academic journal papers, such as conference papers, books, or book chapters. In a secondary literature search we adopted a snowballing approach, yielding the inclusion of 10 additional papers and a

supplementary literature search through Web of Science to identify any studies that might have been overlooked during the preceding search processes (step 2b). Consequently, this additional sample also underwent an eligibility and quality assessment following the same method as described above (step 3b). Out of 203 papers, 193 were excluded as their titles and abstracts revealed duplications or irrelevance to the core topic of parent influencers. This process led to the final sample of the literature review, consisting of 96 papers. Figure 1 visualizes the selection procedure and process.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

In step 4, papers deemed appropriate for inclusion were categorized within three distinct topics based on a comprehensive analysis of their titles, abstracts and methodology section by one reviewer. First, following the framework of Stern (1994) and employing the methodology outlined in a prior literature review on influencer marketing in general (Hudders et al., 2021), papers were classified based on whether they tackle subjects related to the ‘source’, ‘message’ or ‘audience’ of parent influencer content. This tripartite classification served as the foundational structure for analyzing the sample and presenting the results. Importantly to note, some papers were classified into plural clusters when they covered multiple subjects (as also seen in the Appendix). All citations were organized using Excel, and in cases of uncertainty regarding paper categorization, the researchers engaged in discussions to resolve any doubts.

In the second phase of step 4, we proceeded with an in-depth reading of each paper, which allowed us to further classify them based on the adopted methodological approaches and gendered focus of the studies (for an overview, cf. Table 1). This preliminary categorization facilitated the organization of the extensive research corpus, which enabled the distribution of papers among the two participating researchers for a thorough

qualitative examination of the body of research. Hence, each full-text of the collected papers was thoroughly analyzed to gain deeper insights and understanding of the state-of-the-art. This process involved the identification of key topics within each selected study, leading to the emergence of recurring themes. Such an approach facilitated the recognition of variations and similarities both within individual clusters and across the entire dataset. Subsequently, we synthesized this information, culminating in its reporting during the fifth and final stage of the study (cf. below).

## **Results**

### ***Quantitative description overall sample***

Overall, it is notable that the majority of papers within our sample have focused on understanding the content that parent influencers are sharing with their large networks. Specifically, 72 papers delved into the type of content on parent influencers' profiles, whereas only 18 and 26 papers were devoted to understanding the sources of parent influencer content and the impact they have on their audience. As seen in Figure 2, the parent influencer phenomenon started to gain scholarly attention in 2008 but only really expanded from 2015 onwards.

In conclusion, concerning the overall sample, we can infer that only a small minority of the overall sample focused on fathers (N= 7), and families in general (N= 18), while the dominant body of research focuses excessively on mothers only (N= 71).

[Insert Table 1 here]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

### ***Source: studies that analyse parent influencers and their motivations***

#### *Quantitative Description*

In total, 18 papers are dedicated to exploring the sources of the content of parent influencers. It is further revealed that the majority of these studies focused on mothers (N=14), while only one study addressed fathers, and three studies explored families as sources of parent influencer content.

Regarding the methodological approaches employed, scholars predominantly favored qualitative methodologies (N= 14) such as ethnographic case studies, qualitative content analysis, and in-depth interviews. Notably, there was only one study that opted for a quantitative survey method. Furthermore, three studies employed mixed methods, with qualitative content analysis as the primary approach, complemented by additional methods such as quantitative content analysis or in-depth interviews.

#### *Qualitative Description*

The studies grouped within the source category all sought to comprehend the defining characteristics of parent influencers and the motivations driving their involvement in this role. Within this body of research, parent influencers emerge as unique communication entities, embodying a combination of attributes found in ordinary parents, social media influencers, professional writers, and advertisers. When we synthesize the findings within this cluster, we can discern three defining traits that characterize parent influencers: self-expression (e.g. Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Jolly & Matthews, 2017) and authenticity (e.g. Lopez, 2009), professionalization (e.g. Wegener, 2022), and social involvement (e.g. Petersen, 2014). We will discuss each of these further below.

*Self-expression and Authenticity.* Evidently, parent influencers are intrinsically characterized by their role as parents, which consists of a fundamental criterion to be classified a ‘parent’ influencer in the first place. Notably, this criterion is not solely arbitrary; rather, parent influencers authentically embrace various experiences and characteristics of everyday parenthood within their online activities. These attributes enable them to craft a communication style that is embraced by their audience as it is regarded as exceptionally ‘close’ and ‘relatable’ (Zhao and Bouvier, 2022). Besides being ordinary parents, Lopez (2009) argues that parent influencers also have a lot in common with traditional diarists and autobiographers, as they engage in the writing of solitary and private reflections from their own subjective point-of-view. Scholars have consistently acknowledged the substantial influence of the desire for self-expression and identity formation among parent influencers (e.g. Hunter, 2015). This phenomenon is especially conspicuous among mothers, who frequently find themselves navigating the intricate balance between the expectations of intensive motherhood, which places the child’s needs at the forefront, and their own personal need for identity development. In response, research on momfluencers posits that the creation of online content is often driven by an intrinsic need to construct and convey their individual identities Petersen (2014).

Crucially, although children occupy a central role within the social media profiles of their influencer parents, and the delineation between their identities and those of their parents can be blurry, their viewpoints regarding the disclosure of their personal identity often receive less attention. Moreover, when determining whether and what to share on their influencer platforms, parents engage in complex thinking processes, typically without active involvement of their children. Rather, they independently weigh-off their various roles (such as the need for personal identity development and the responsibility of safeguarding their child’s privacy and well-being) and obligations to diverse stakeholders

(including themselves, their children now and in the future, and their offline and online communities) when deciding upon the boundaries of their own digital identities (e.g. Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

*Professionalization.* Although parent influencers communicate alike and alongside regular parents on social media, their online activities are characterized by a heightened degree of professionalism. Research posits that the digital transformation has redefined the workplace, enabling ordinary parents to professionalize their primary role as caregivers. It further contends that parent influencers can be considered professional writers, as they adhere to rigorous posting schedules, meet deadlines, and place significant emphasis on a strong work ethic (Petersen, 2014). This comes as no surprise, as the research of Porfirio and Jorge (2022) highlights that a substantial portion of content created by parent influencers features some form of commercial presence.

Influencers indeed often serve as invaluable partners for advertisers, providing a channel through which they can effectively convey their messages to a receptive audience. In turn, these revenues and professionalization of their content makes it possible for them to continue providing content to their audience in an increasingly professional way.

Nevertheless, it is crucial for parent influencers to make a delicate balance between professionalization and authenticity within their content. Concretely, while the digital transformation has allowed influencers to professionalize their roles as parents and make a profitable endeavor of their content creation, ensuring (an illusion of) authenticity remains a vital element of their popularity and trustworthiness (Abidin, 2017). This often demands considerable effort from influencers, a concept known as ‘authenticity management.’ This encompasses the behind-the-scenes endeavors that influencers

undertake to craft relatable and seemingly genuine social media content (Abidin, 2020). This effort is most likely considerably higher for sponsored content, as sponsored partnerships often come with highly scripted and promotional statements of the involved brands and marketers (Pedersen & Aspevig, 2018).

*Social Involvement.* Finally, research within the realm of parent influencers consistently underscores the distinct social status and involvement they occupy. While the broader blogosphere tends to be male-dominated, the focus of parent influencer studies predominantly centers on mothers as influential figures (Lopez, 2009). Nevertheless, it is posited that both mother and father influencers are often motivated by a profound social consciousness, driven to offer social support within their networks and to redefine societal norms (e.g. Hunter, 2015).

***Message: studies that analyze the content and discourses directed to parents.***

#### *Quantitative Description*

Among the collected sample of papers, the category of studies examining the messages of parent influencers (N=72) stands out as the most substantial subgroup. Within this category, there is a notable gender imbalance that prevails across the papers. In specific, nearly 70% of these papers (N= 50) focused on the messages of mother influencers, whereas only 7 investigated the messages of fathers and 15 those of families in general.

In terms of methodologies, our analysis reveals that 62 studies embraced a qualitative approach, while a smaller proportion consisted of 5 studies each for both quantitative and mixed-methodological approaches. Significantly, scholars have primarily employed content analysis as their method of choice for studying the online messages disseminated by influential parents. To elaborate, out of these content analyses, 42 employed

qualitative approaches, while 3 exclusively utilized quantitative methods, and 5 incorporated a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies when analyzing their collected content. Other methodologies, such as In-depth interviews and (n)ethnographies, were adopted within a much smaller portion of the message focused papers.

### *Qualitative Description*

In comparison to the source and audience, researchers have focused extensively on the messages that are broadcasted, and investigated a vast array of topics, including the depiction of pregnancy (Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017), narratives about childbirth (Das, 2017), breastfeeding images (Locatelli, 2017), representation of motherhood and maternity (Cornelio, 2021), wine mom discourses – in which alcoholism is presented as a means of escapism (Newman & Nelson, 2021), as well as yummy and slummy mummy representations – with an emphasis on the influencer’s looks (Orton-Johnson, 2017). Overall, it’s noticeable how the messages often put additional weight on the shoulders of mothers and exacerbate rather than mitigate responsabilization processes. For example, Tiidenberg and Baym (2017) found three overlapping discourses (learn it, buy it and work it) that together create the authoritative language they call “intensive pregnancy”. Mothers are guided towards an intense self-education and lifestyle-specific set of expert knowledge (learn it), are overwhelmed with consumer rituals that are equated with the act of care (buy it), as well as images that show how pregnant women can still look ‘sexy’ (work it).

In the study of the dominant messages, attention is paid toward both the messages from everyday parents and parent influencers. Many underlying discourses were found that could be harmful for both parents and their children, including unequal gender roles

(Jorge et al., 2023), an emphasis on alcohol for coping and escapism (Newman & Nelson, 2021), and a public exhibition of children's practices that are often perceived as intimate and exclusive (Porfirio & Jorge, 2022). In contrast to popular views, the few studies that are devoted to the messages spread by fathers and dad influencers depict a rather positive image: fostering a culture of fatherhood that is more nurturing and uplifting (Scheibling & Marsiglio, 2021); calling for practical changes that stimulates father involvement, e.g. changing tables in men's washrooms (Scheibling & Milkie, 2023); and trying to stimulate involved fatherhood representations in mainstream communications (Campana et al., 2020).

Looking into the messages that are analyzed in the various academic studies it's noticeable on how most look into ideal parenthood (and especially motherhood) and its struggles (e.g., Morrison, 2014; Lamarre et al., 2015). Certain articles focus on how ideal motherhood is represented, how women negotiate their identities as mothers, and overall create a sense of belonging. Others focus more on how digital labor is performed and how dominant representations of motherhood and maternity are challenged or re-enacted. A second theme focuses more on children (e.g. Morrison, 2014). The majority of articles spotlight the manners in which parents communicate about and cope with a child with a specific disorder (e.g. ADHD), disease (e.g. cancer), or communicate about a specific circumstance (e.g. when their child is a patient in intensive care). Lastly, there exists a theme that leans towards discussions regarding women's health: encompassing topics like pregnancy-related anxiety, complications during pregnancy linked to the COVID-19 vaccine, breast cancer, vaginal birth after cesarean, and more (e.g. Frizzo et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2021).

***Audience: studies that investigate parents' everyday experiences with parent influencers and its impact***

*Quantitative Description*

The comprehensive body of research dedicated to studying the audience of parent influencers comprises 26 papers. Here again, a discernible trend can be identified in which mothers as an audience of parent influencers' content attract the largest number of scholarly attention (N= 21). Remarkably, only five studies extend their investigations to parents in general, with none exclusively focusing on fathers.

As opposed to the other clusters, audience research adopted a more balanced methodological approach, with a slight majority of papers employing quantitative methods (N=12), as opposed to qualitative ones (N=10). Besides, whereas the mixed methods approach within the previous two clusters consistently entailed the combination of qualitative and quantitative content analyses, audience research also combined survey methods and content analyses.

*Qualitative Description*

Research focusing on the audience can broadly be subdivided in those investigating how audiences perceive recommendations or persuasive attempts made by parent influencers (e.g. Bryan et al., 2023) and those looking into how influencers' content in a broader sense contributes to process of meaning-making among parents (e.g. Orton-Johnson, 2017). Besides, although influencer marketing research in general is greatly focused on the underlying mechanisms driving influencers' persuasiveness (Lou, 2022), it is remarkable to observe the noticeable absence of this perspective in the realm of audience research concerning parent influencers. Concretely, little knowledge exists on how parents actually engage with the content of parent influencers and how this contributes to

the trans parasocial relationship they have with that influencer (Lou, 2022) and consequently their parental attitudes, decision-making and well-being. Although valuable, previous studies only touched the surface of these topics, by merely describing the intensity of the connection between parents and parent influencers in terms of ‘how many times parents actively visit SMIs’ profiles per hour/day/week or month’ (Ouvrein, 2022).

As argued above, a large part of audience research is focused on understanding how parent influencers contribute to the parental norms and attitudes of their followers. Additionally, it is worth noting that this body of research, much like the research in the message cluster, is often approached by analyzing the available online content (i.e. the audience’s voice within the comment sections; e.g. Lehto, 2020). As such, in the context of sunscreen and vaccination adoption, it is argued that parent influencers more frequently cite scientific evidence, as opposed to the claims their followers make in the comment sections (Meleo-Erwin et al., 2017; Tamminga & Lipoff, 2021). Furthermore, followers frequently strengthen the discourse of influencers by sharing their own struggles with motherhood, highlighting that they too face challenges in performing their maternal roles (Lehto, 2020).

To conclude, a much smaller part of audience research focuses on understanding how recommendations concerning commercial (e.g. Beuckels & De Jans, 2022; Holiday et al., 2021) and non-commercial behavior (Bryan et al., 2023) of parent influencers is perceived and adopted by their audience. Two studies in the field of advertising research, indicate that parent influencers are considered as more persuasive as opposed to brands (Beuckels & De Jans, 2022) and that advertising are not always successful in reversing this effect as followers appreciate the associated transparency (Holiday et al., 2021). In the non-commercial context, research findings are mixed. While some argue that parent

influencers are successful in making the transition to motherhood easier, others suggest that mom influencers have positive effects on the self-efficacy of primigravida, whereas these effects are reversed once mothers actually have their baby (Ouvrein, 2022). To conclude, two studies demonstrate promising results of employing parent bloggers as conduits of scientifically based interventions, in the context of breast cancer risk awareness (Wright et al., 2019) and healthy food promotion (Dumas et al., 2021). Nevertheless, research on the persuasiveness of parent influencers is extremely scarce, which is a surprising observation considering their designation as parent ‘influencers’ and their recognized status as opinion leaders (Wright et al., 2019).

### **Towards a future research agenda**

In this article we analyzed the field of parent influencers using a systematic literature review, covering a total of 96 studies. Specifically, we employed the five-step methodology of Khan et al. (2022) and the framework of (Stern, 1994) to structure and present our results. Even though the field is still in its infancy, it is rapidly growing. In this final section we summarize the most important findings and offer a template for a future research agenda.

First, our analyses show disproportionately more attention has been devoted to mothers, mom influencers, and discourses and content that are related to motherhood (e.g., pregnancy, maternity, breast feeding). It’s necessary that more attention is devoted to dads, dad influencers and content and discourses related to fatherhood. Specifically, according to Scheibling and Milkie (2023), parent influencers have catalyzed a shift from intensive mothering to intensive parenting discourses. This shift may have positive aspects, such as the redistribution of parenting responsibilities, but it also raises concerns as it exposes both mothers and fathers to the pressures of parental perfectionism,

potentially impacting their stress levels and overall mental well-being. Remarkably, within the body of research specifically dedicated to the audience of parent influencers, there is a complete absence of studies examining how fathers receive and interpret parenting influencers' content. Hence, there is a clear need to study the extent to which fathers engage with parent influencers and the consequent impact this has on their parental roles.

Second, when analyzing influencers themselves and their motivations, it becomes clear that they are characterized by self-expression and authenticity, professionalization, and social involvement. However, we find there to be a lack of diversity in the influencer landscape. This can be said about both the source and the audience. Indeed, insights on minority parents as content creators are missing, as well as insights into the reception of content by minority groups. The sole study that has explored anti-racism within the realm of parent influencers' profiles concludes that the prevalence of virtuous white mothers as influencers is hindering genuine efforts to challenge and confront racism (Vonk, 2019). Specifically, she contends that, despite their attempts to appear socially conscious, these actions often serve as commercial strategies that perpetuate power imbalances through stereotypical portrayals of Black and Indigenous motherhood as recipients of 'help'. Parent influencer research argues that content creation by parents is often used as a radical act to counter hegemonic norms (Lopez, 2009). The noticeable lack of diversity within our research sample underscores the urgent necessity for future research initiatives to explore how parents from diverse communities engage in the creation and interpretation of parent influencer content. It should also be recognized that the contemporary family landscape is rather complex. It is curial to prioritize inclusivity and diversity in family composition if we want a more comprehensive and accurate view on parent influencers and their impact on society. The modern concept of a 'family' has

evolved significantly, encompassing the traditional nuclear family and many others such as the single-parent households, LGBTQ+ families, blended families to name a few. Nevertheless, with the notable exception of Hunter (2015) and Payne (2013), the main body of parent influencer research focuses on “white mothers” in a traditional nuclear family (e.g. Vonk, 2019; Zhao & Bouvier, 2022).

Third, although initial research efforts have been made to understand how influencer content is infiltrating the lives of expecting and new mothers (Ouvrein, 2022) and how isolated individual factors affect the impact of this matter on their digital use and well-being (Egmose et al., 2022), the role of fathers and many other person- and context-specific factors have been overlooked so far. Over the past years, individuals’ relationship with digital media and their continuous quest for the optimal balance between digital connection and disconnection for ‘digital wellbeing’ is receiving tremendous research attention in the field of communication research (For an overview, we refer to Vanden Abeele, 2021), which can be used to further conceptualize and operationalize ‘parental wellbeing’. Plural studies indicate that the parent influencer landscape is characterized by a large number of paradoxes, representing a place fostering both parental support and insecurities, spreading expert knowledge and misinformation (Cornelio, 2021), confirming hegemonic gendered parenting norms and providing counter-narratives (Scheibling, 2023). Initial research among mothers suggests that the impact of parent influencers content on parental wellbeing greatly depends on the type of content being consumed (e.g. level of professionalization of the influencer) and personality traits of the followers (e.g. the followers’ social comparison orientation) (Egmose, 2022). Besides, while intensive media consumption is often over pathologized, we argue that excessive dependency on media content is often temporal and fostered by stressful life events (Aldinger & Schulze, 2017). In line with recent digital well-being research (Vanden

Abeelee, 2021), we argue that hedonic (providing pleasure) and eudaimonic (providing meaning) experiences should also be accounted for when studying individuals' media consumption habits. Considering all the aforementioned factors, it is essential to offer a comprehensive and dynamic conceptualization of how parents consume and engage with parent influencer content. This includes an exploration of how they assess the value of these platforms in comparison to more traditional parenting information sources and how such interactions impact their digital (parental) well-being.

Fourth, many if not most studies have been devoted to analyzing the dominant discourses of the messages sent by parent influencers, hereby shaping what it means to be a good parent in the digital age. Of course, the latter does not necessarily imply that parents simply suffer and follow these discourses. As proposed by the research of Geinger et al. (2014), parents possess agency and experts should avoid excessively problematizing the challenges they face and from solely viewing them as individuals in need of assistance. In line with that, we recommend future research to gain a better understanding of the impact of parent influencer content on parental attitudes and well-being through an approach that acknowledges parents' agency and how they navigate the influence of parent influencers. Related to this, the large majority of studies focused on analyzing the content shared by parent influencers and how they are infiltrated with neo liberalistic values and commercialized content (Zhao & Bouvier, 2022). Parent influencers indeed often enjoy strong partnerships with advertisers, who pay them to promote products to their trusting audience, valuing their recommendations as authentic (Hudders et al., 2021). Consequently, parenting challenges are frequently accompanied by prominently marketed consumer solutions on parent influencers' platforms (Scheibling & Milkie, 2023). However, despite the great attention to commercialization in the message and source cluster, research to understand the impact of the pervasive blend of sponsored and

editorial content on the followers is severely lacking (with few exceptions only; Beuckels & De Jans, 2022; Holiday et al., 2021). Besides, such as in the message cluster, audience research often relies on the analyses of content that is only available in the comment sections of parent bloggers. Nonetheless, it is argued that media consumers exhibit diverse patterns of media consumption, with only a minority actively participating in interactions (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). This suggests that the perspectives of passive media users, often referred to as ‘lurkers,’ are not considered within these research approaches. However, research suggests that the type of media use can moderate its effects on the mental well-being of media consumers (Meier & Krause, 2022). This calls for innovative methodologies within audience research, to understand how and why parents choose to passively or actively interact with influencer content and how this affects their mental well-being.

Fifth, while a vast majority of studies employ qualitative research techniques (e.g. Archer, 2019a; Cornelio, 2021; Orton-Johnson, 2017), longitudinal qualitative research projects are mostly missing, with some notable exceptions (Jorge et al., 2023; Jorge et al., 2022). To develop an adequate understanding of family life and how they reflect on and make decisions, we argue in line with ethnographer (e.g. Seim, 2021) that “one must become immersed and take part in it (...), while at the same time one must maintain the role of a relatively detached observer (p.2).” For example, parent influencers are known to give advice on preparing lunch boxes, kid-friendly activities, organizing morning routines and breastfeeding. Rather than asking questions or analyzing online content, actually following the families in their specific environment offer new opportunities to initiate conversations and truly unravel the role and significance of parent influencers in everyday decision-making.

On a final note, we would like to highlight how parent influencer research tends to ignore other stakeholders within the influencer ecosystem. For instance, due to social media algorithms and individuals' natural inclination towards selective avoidance (i.e., actively ignoring differing opinions), some scholars suggest that social media users frequently operate in as 'echo chambers' or 'filter bubbles' (Cinelli et al., 2021). These clusters consist of users who share similar opinions, creating homophilic environments. Although not empirically investigated in relation to parent influencers, this could lead parents to mistakenly believe that everyone adheres to the same parenting norms as they do (Mertens & Beuckels, 2023). However, real-life parenting norms are more diverse (Hunter, 2015) and the concept of filter bubbles and echo chambers are now being challenged as it may be linked to the broader trend of societal polarization (Bruns, 2019). Future research should therefore explore how platforms, their algorithms and larger societal trends shape online parent networks. Further, as argued above, parent influencers frequently engage with commercial institutions, who often exert significant influence over the content creation process. As a last example, children are often portrayed within parent influencers' (commercial) content, which raises some significant ethical concerns (Hudders et al., 2022). Indeed, it is striking how these perspectives are currently completely missing.

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

In conclusion, our study underscores the need for innovative and inclusive future research endeavors that transcend the narrow boundaries of the current research landscape, which predominantly centers on the content produced by influential white, middle-class digital mother influencers. Our literature review is based on a systematic search process, primarily relying on the Scopus database. Like any method, this process inherently comes with some limitations. To avoid an overwhelmingly and unmanageable sample, we

designed a search string that would most accurately collect the topics we wanted to include based on our research questions. However, we acknowledge that this approach comes with the risk of missing relevant papers if they used different search terms that we did not anticipate on (e.g. metaphors to describe influencers).

Further, we are aware that our approach did not include the body of research focusing on future or aspiring parents (e.g. fertility influencers) and only includes English articles. To conclude, our sample was collected in May 2023, a moment in time when the influencer sphere is booming but also rapidly evolving hand in hand with digital innovations. Specifically, live streaming functions on social media platforms and the emergence of the web 3.0 will most likely have a strong impact on parent-influencer interactions in the future and further foster research assessing this evolution. Additionally, the chosen cut-off date implies that studies published thereafter were not incorporated into the sample, despite the potential relevance of some of them. Overall, this literature review is time-bound but serves as a basis for future endeavors, and sheds light on the ever-changing nature of influencers as a whole and parent influencers specifically.

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The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest

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Table 1. Quantitative description overall sample

	Source	Message	Audience	Total*
<b>N</b>	18	72	26	
<b>Gendered focus</b>				
<i>Fathers</i>	1	7	0	8
<i>Mothers</i>	14	50	21	85
<i>Families</i>	3	15	5	23
<b>Research Methodology</b>				
<b>Qualitative methodologies</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>87</b>
<i>Content analysis</i>	4	42	5	51
<i>Qualitative survey</i>	1	0	1	2
<i>In-depth interviews</i>	6	4	2	12
<i>Case study</i>	2	4	0	6
<i>(N)Ethnography</i>	1	12	2	15
<b>Quantitative Methodologies</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>Survey</i>	1	1	2	4
<i>Content analysis</i>	0	3	1	4
<i>Experiments</i>	0	0	6	6
<i>Intervention testing</i>	0	0	2	2
<i>Intervention mapping</i>	0	1	1	2
<b>Mixed Methods Methodologies</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>Qualitative + Quantitative content analysis</i>	2	5	2	9
<i>Survey + content analysis</i>	0	0	1	1
<i>Qualitative + quantitative survey</i>	0	0	1	1
<i>Qualitative content analysis + In-depth interviews</i>	1	0	0	1

\*Please note that certain cumulative numbers may exceed the total sample of papers, as some papers have been assigned to multiple categories.

Figure 1. Sample selection

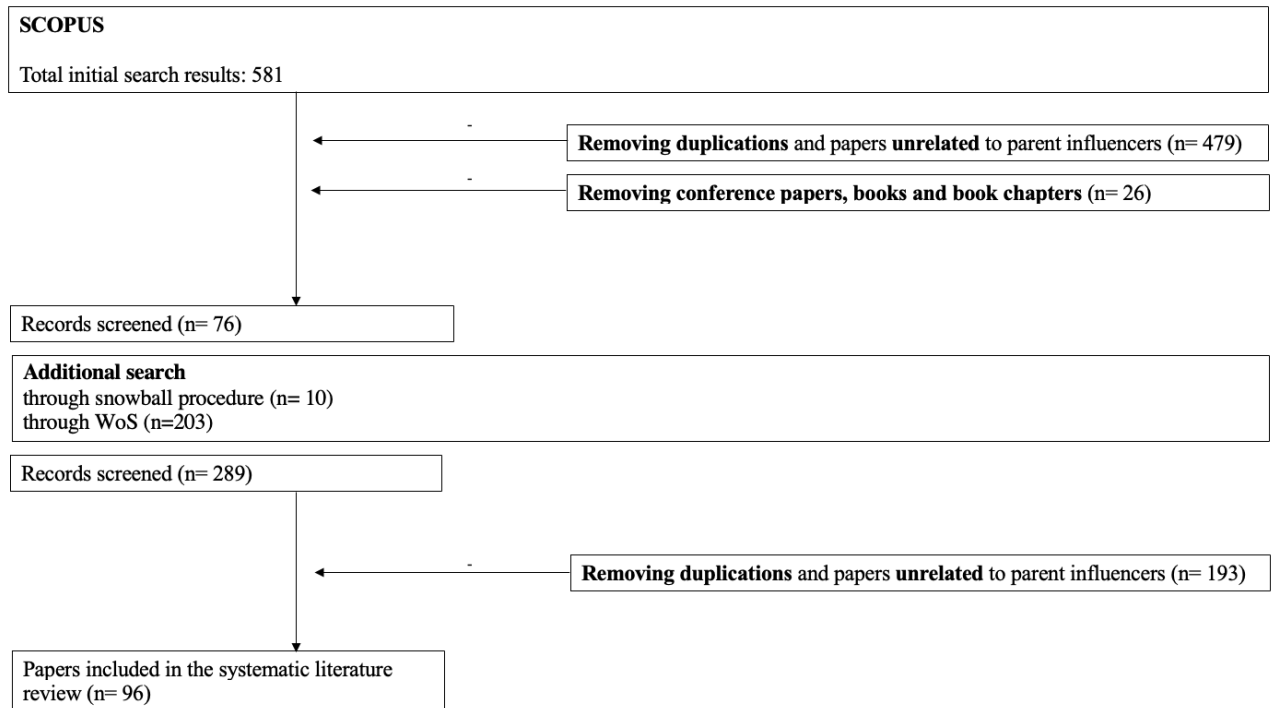


Figure 2. Yearly evolution of publications

