

# **Instagram influencers using photos of children for marketing purposes**

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## **Abstract**

Social media has transformed modern communication, information sharing, and networking of people. The internet, in general, provides great opportunities, especially for young people, who are its biggest users, but it also introduces many risks: at the same time, there are negative impacts related to privacy, fake news, and excessive use that can negatively affect their mental health.

The most famous platforms today are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok. These platforms allow users to connect with friends, family members, strangers, etc., share images, videos, and thoughts, and engage in discussions but also earn money by advertising products to their followers.

In the field of marketing, as a result of the spread of social media, a new profession has emerged in recent years, the so-called influencer. An influencer is a person who has the ability to influence potential buyers of products or services by promoting or recommending them through their social media profiles. The most famous influencers, very often, in addition to the products they advertise, share photos and videos of their private lives, including their children, if they have them.

The use of images of children by influencers can have negative consequences especially when it comes to the privacy and safety of their children. This paper aims to analyze the potential negative impacts of publishing children's photos on Instagram for marketing purposes, such as children's privacy, potential opportunities for fraud, exploitation and commercialization of children, etc. The paper will use available literature and studies on

**the impact of social media on users and will present a study conducted in the Republic of North Macedonia regarding the perception of parents about Instagram influencers using children's photos for marketing purposes.**

**Keywords: social networks, influencers, children's photography, marketing.**

## **Introduction**

The introduction of the internet and electronic communication into our everyday lives in the late 20th century may be the most significant contemporary global change affecting our lives, but also family life, partnerships, and parenting. Today's generations are born surrounded by digital technology in every aspect of their lives, and this in turn leads to changes, above all, in the way of communication with people.<sup>1</sup> Social media has transformed people's communication, information sharing, and networking using short messages, emails, videos, or photos.

The most famous platforms today by the number of users are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and TikTok. These platforms allow users to connect with friends, family members, strangers, etc., share images, videos, and thoughts, and engage in discussions but also earn money by advertising products to their followers. The internet, in general, provides great opportunities, especially for young people, who are its biggest users, but it also introduces many risks: at the same time, there are negative impacts related to privacy, fake news, and excessive use has a negative impact on mental health.

Social networks and technological innovations such as smart mobile devices have transformed substantially the field of marketing as well, giving place in the past decades to digital, social media, and mobile (DSMM) marketing. The digital transformation of marketing reflects the way companies and customers use new technologies, the way customers and brands interact and share information among themselves.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this digital transformation and the spread of social media, a new profession has emerged in recent years, the so-called influencer. An influencer is a person who has the ability to influence potential buyers of products or services by promoting or recommending them through their social media profiles.

In the past years, we have witnessed increased presence on social media of mothers, mothers-bloggers, parents and influencers that very often, in addition to the products they advertise, share photos and videos of their private lives, including their children. On the one hand, social media and their commercialization has influenced social expectations of parenting, motherhood and childhood. On the other hand, the normalization of the presence of children content on social media comes with many risks and potential negative consequences<sup>3</sup>

This paper will analyze potential risks that arise when using the internet and social media with a focus on the use of images of children by influencers. Sharing images of children for marketing purposes can have negative consequences. Thus, this study will focus on the potential negative impacts of publishing children's photos on Instagram, such as children's privacy and safety, potential opportunities for fraud, exploitation and commercialization of children, etc. The paper

will use available literature and studies on the impact of social media on users and will present a study conducted in the Republic of North Macedonia regarding the perception of parents about Instagram influencers using children's photos for marketing purposes.

### **Potential risks that arise when using the internet**

From the previous research on the impact of excessive use of social networks, exposure to internet content, and screens in general, especially on young people and children, negative and positive results emerge. For children of preschool age, the research is usually in the direction of the duration of exposure to digital content and screens, while for older children and adolescents, attention is focused more on the content to which they are exposed. From there, there is also the need for parents to have insight into what their children are watching and to direct them to use the internet primarily for informational purposes. Although there are negative impacts from excessive exposure to digital content, especially social media, there are also a number of benefits offered by modern digital and technological development. More specifically,<sup>4</sup> points out the general opportunities and risks of young people using the internet.<sup>5</sup> Potential risks may include:

- illegal content
- pedophiles grooming strangers
- extreme or sexual violence
- harmful or offensive content
- racist or hate material and activities
- advertising, and stealth marketing
- biased information or misinformation
- abuse of personal information,
- cyber-bullying and harassment
- gambling, phishing
- financial scams
- self-harm
- invasions or abuse of privacy
- illegal activities

The reality is that the digital world, the internet, and social networks provide opportunities and benefits for young people, but at the same time, they pose a risk to children, especially during the period of cognitive and emotional development when they are actually most vulnerable.<sup>6</sup>

One of the major concerns when using the internet and social media is privacy and identity theft. Parents and relatives should be cautious when it comes to sharing photos and information related to their children, due to unintended consequences such as illegal use of that information, identity theft, etc. The daily use of social media has also normalized sharing segments of one's private life with one's friends on these platforms. But often, users are not aware that excessive sharing of information can lead to misuse of that information, its abuse, theft, etc., especially when it comes to electronic addresses, personal information, and photos.<sup>7</sup>

Another possible risk posed to every social media user especially children is cyber violence which represents intentional harm caused by communication through computers, mobile phones, or other electronic devices. That communication includes expressing and causing

malicious and unpleasant feelings towards other persons, public publication of offensive or embarrassing information about a person, intimidation, threats, etc. Research so far shows that the target of cyber violence is more often young people or women, while men or boys are more likely to be the perpetrators. The consequences of cyber violence and harassment are often psychological damage that can cause the victims feelings of disappointment, anger, and sadness, but also chronic diseases and suicide attempts.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, online pedophilia may represent one of the most frightening consequences that have emerged as a result of the global use of social media. Pedophiles, hidden under fake profiles, manage to get the attention of their child victims, and then through online communication, they gain their trust, to finally induce the victims to have a meeting with them. Although pedophilia is not a new crime, the internet and social media are giving these abusers new ways to access children. Therefore, it is extremely important that parents talk openly with their children about the risks of communicating with strangers through social networks and, if the children are younger, to have insight into their online activities.<sup>9 10</sup>

In conclusion, privacy concerns emerge in the digital landscape, as individuals, parents, influencers, and organizations handle the difficult balance between sharing information and safeguarding personal data. The phenomenon of online harassment and cyberbullying has appeared as a reminder of the darker side of connectivity, impacting individuals' mental and emotional well-being, especially children. While the internet and social media have undoubtedly facilitated unprecedented connectivity, information access, and innovation, it has also given rise to a host of challenges that demand our attention and vigilance.

## **‘Sharenting’**

The increased use of technology in our lives has changed the way people share important events in their everyday lives as well. Parents who have social media profiles often share photos, videos, and stories of their children, besides their personal posts. The process of sharing online information on social media about underage children by their parents or caregivers is often referred to as ‘sharenting’. The notion of ‘sharenting’ has gained to some extent negative connotation as it assumes that parents overshare updates and details about their children’s lives, thus spending too much time online instead of quality time with them. Moreover, by communicating a lot of detailed information about their children, parents and caregivers might disregard other important aspects of their lives, including ethics, privacy, and children’s rights<sup>11</sup>

Parents usually share updates about their children to show friends and family members the children’s progress, milestones, and how happy and fulfilled their lives are. At the same time, photos of children are easily likable and very popular. For this reason, influencers very often use their children’s photos for marketing purposes on their social media profiles. Influencers often incorporate their children into their content to engage their audience and create relatable and family-oriented content. However, there are several considerations and potential consequences to be aware of when influencers use their children’s photos for marketing and some of them include:<sup>12 13 14</sup>(Keskin et al., 2023; Kallioharju et al., 2023; Livingstone, 2009):

- Consent and privacy. It's essential for influencers to consider their children's privacy and obtain consent if the children are old enough to understand the implications of their photos or videos being shared online.
- Online safety. Children whose photos are shared online are exposed to potential risks including online predators and pedophiles.
- Ethical concerns. People often question whether using children's images by influencers for marketing purposes is a form of exploitation.
- Impact on children. Oversharing children's images and videos by influencers can influence their future behavior and perception.

Other consequences might include legal regulations, authenticity and trust as well as audience reactions. Influencers who use their children's photos and videos for marketing purposes should be aware of the potential risks, be responsible, and be mindful of the potential impact on their children's future reputation. Moreover, influencers as well as parents should be aware of the legal regulations and advertising standards regarding the use of children's images for commercial purposes. Besides these possible risks, influencers are often exposed to criticism and should be prepared for the audience's reactions. Therefore, it is essential that parents and influencers take measures to protect their children's privacy when incorporating them into their content and choose carefully which children's photos to share publicly.

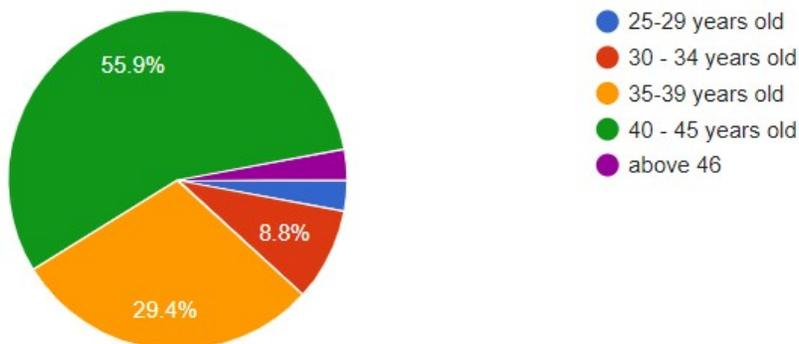
In our study on the perception of parents about Instagram influencers using children's photos for marketing purposes in North Macedonia, we focus both on the potential risks that arise when using the internet and the concept of 'sharenting', and we based our study on existing research on this topic. The abovementioned study is from Finland and conducted on mothers who have Instagram profiles for children's fashion. This study confirms that children's photos play a significant role in creating the social media profile of the mothers and they express esthetical preferences of mothers. Mothers view their children as their extended selves and justify 'sharenting'<sup>15</sup> Finally, in this direction, an additional study on 'sharenting' concludes that 72% of parents share their children's photos and videos in order to validate their parenting, show that they are good parents and feel less lonely.<sup>16</sup>

## **Study on the perception of parents about Instagram influencers using children's photos for marketing purposes in North Macedonia**

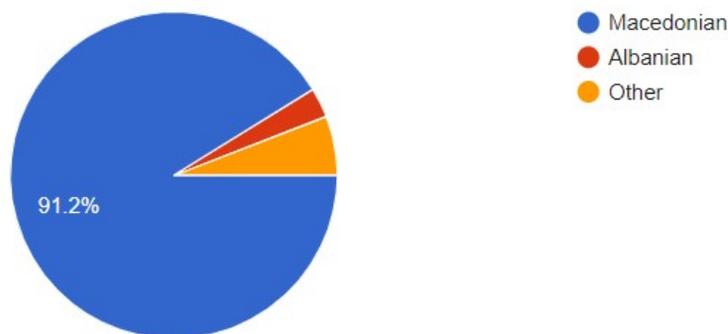
The research we conducted used a questionnaire of a total of 13 questions, related to the possible negative impacts that sharing children's photos might cause and the perception of parents about Instagram influencers using their children's images for commercial purposes. The questions related to the perception of parents about influencers' 'sharenting' was measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates the least agree, and 5 indicates the most agree, while other questions used a multiple choice answering method. A convenience sample of 72 respondents was used in the primary research, with a defined target group: parents. Data collection was carried out by sending a link from the questionnaire created in Google Forms via

e-mail with a request from the recipients of the electronic message to share the link further with their acquaintances, friends, etc. (snowball method). We received an unequal gender distribution of respondents with 97,1% of female respondents which we point out as limitation of our study, as well as the need to dig deeper into this topic and conduct another study in the future. The remaining results regarding the demographic and behavioral characteristics of the sample are shown in the two following graphs:

Graph 1: Age distribution of the respondents.



Graph 2: Ethnicity of the respondents.

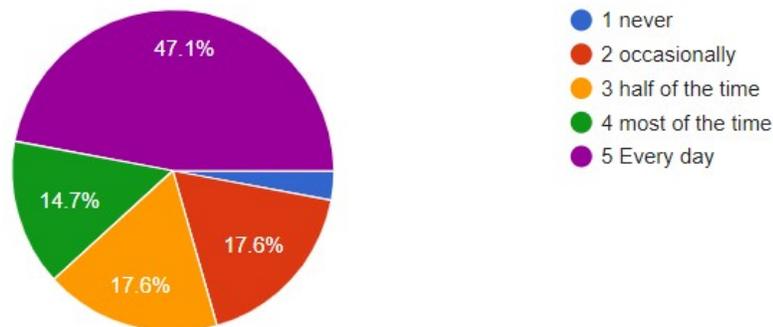


As shown in the graphs our sample of 72 respondents consisted predominantly of Macedonian female parents, out of which more than half belong to the age group 40 to 45 years old. Although our initial intention was to have a more diverse sample, we failed to collect data from male respondents and those belonging to different ethnicities besides Macedonian, which set a limitation in our general findings.

The first question we asked our respondents was how often they come across social media posts featuring children, such as celebrities or influencers sharing their photos of family life. As

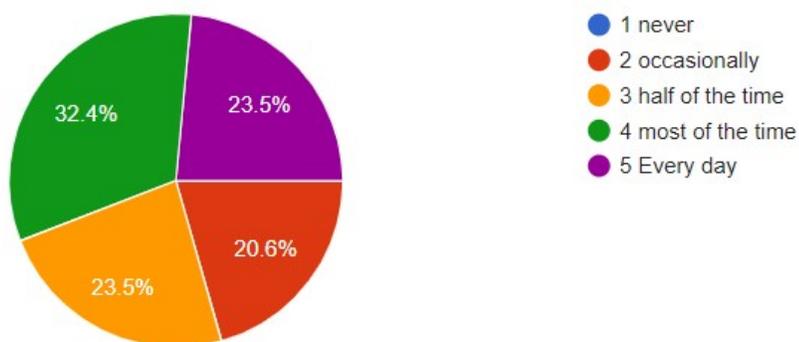
shown in the following graph, the majority of respondents (47,1%) have stated to have been exposed to children's photos on social media on a daily basis, which reveals that sharing content featuring children on social media is quite normalized in North Macedonia as in other European countries.<sup>17</sup> In this direction, the study by<sup>18</sup> confirms that mothers and influencers tend to share on social media images of their well-dressed children as a way to create a positive image of themselves and their children and to potentially compensate with something they used to do physically in the public space in the past.

*Graph 3: How often do you come across social media posts featuring children, such as celebrities or influencers sharing their photos of family life?*



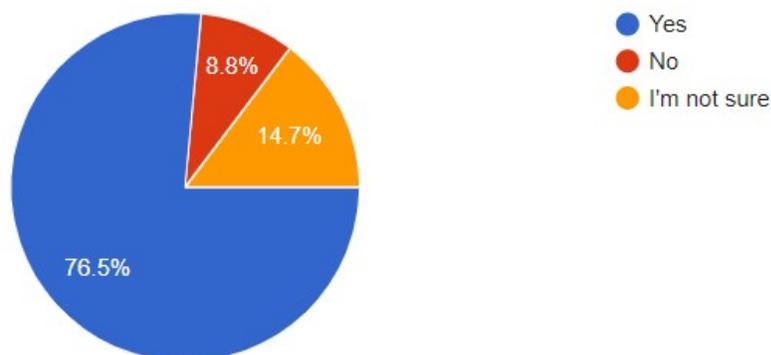
The following question tackles the privacy and safety of children, whose content is exposed on social media. One-third of parents (32,4%) are concerned about this issue and believe that sharing images of children on social media raises concern about their privacy and safety most of the time, while 23,5% of respondents believe that their privacy and safety are compromised on a daily basis. Additionally, this question opens indirectly the discussion about the right of parents to share information of their children on social media versus the right of children to consent and define their online and digital presence, and safeguard their privacy.<sup>19</sup>

*Graph 4: Do you believe that sharing images of children on social media can raise concerns about their privacy and safety?*



The sixth question is related to the awareness of parents of the risks associated with the commercialization of children through influencer marketing on platforms like Instagram. The results show that a very high number of respondents (76,5%) are conscious of the danger associated with the use of children's photos on Instagram for commercial purposes. However, as demonstrated in previous studies, although many parents or influencers are aware of potential risks, they continue to post children's content for marketing and even justify it (Keskin et al., 2023). The identical results were concluded from the next question which asked respondents whether they think there should be stricter regulations or guidelines for influencers when it comes to sharing images of children for marketing purposes with 76,5% answering positively.

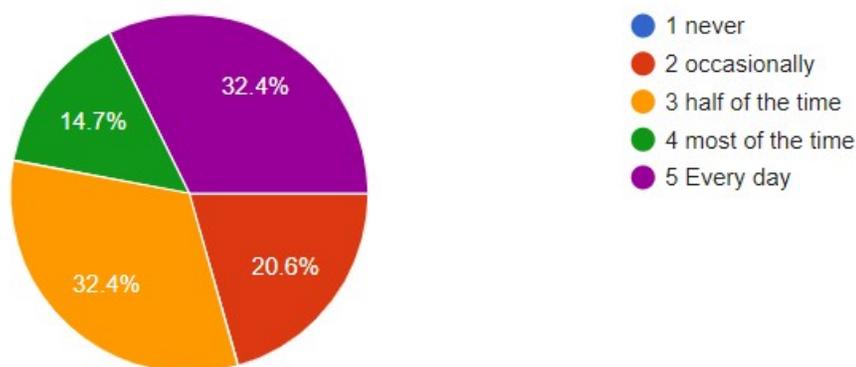
Graph 5: Are you aware of any potential risks associated with the commercialization of children through influencer marketing on platforms like Instagram?



The following question is related to the parent's concern about the potential for fraudulent activities or scams involving children's images on social media platforms. 32,4% of parents are concerned about this matter on a daily basis, 14,7% are concerned most of the time, 32,4% are concerned half of the time and the rest (20,6%) are concerned only occasionally. We can

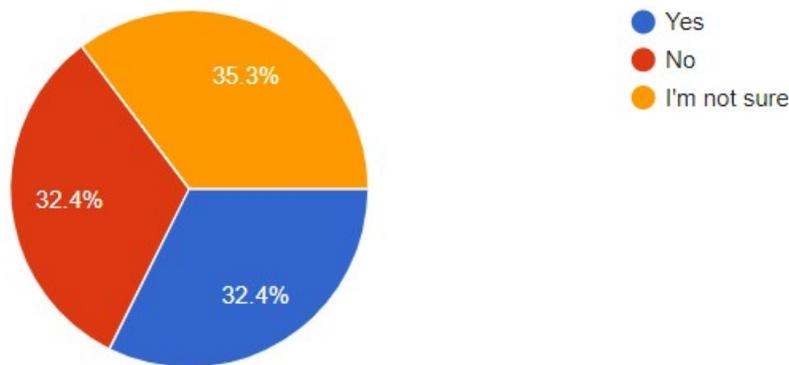
conclude that there is a general concern among parents in North Macedonia regarding possible fraudulent activities involving children's images shared on social media, however, results show that the respondents are not alarmed about potential risks such as illegal activities, scams, and potential abuse of personal information. According to Kallioharju et al. (2023), even though many mothers, mother-bloggers and influencers are aware of the potential risks involving sharing their children's content online, they continue to do so and justify it predominantly because: (1) their child is part of their self-representation as parents, (2) their Instagram profile represents an online photo album or a way to preserve family memories, and (3) their children enjoy taking pictures and spending time together with their parents.

Graph 6: Are you concerned about the potential for fraudulent activities or scams involving children's images on social media platforms?



When it comes to the question of whether parents have heard of instances where children's photos on social media were exploited for commercial gain without the child's consent, the responses are divided. Namely, one-third of respondents gave a positive answer and one-third responded negatively. Percentile results are given in graph 8. In this context, the majority of parents (78,8%) believe that influencers should obtain consent from children or their guardians before including them in promotional content on social media. 15,2% respondents are not sure whether consent from children is necessary and only 6% respondent do not believe children's consent should be given to their parents or guardians when posting content that includes them.

Graph 7: Have you ever witnessed or heard of instances where children's photos on social media were exploited for commercial gain without the child's consent?



The last question regards specific measures that parents think should be in place to protect the privacy and well-being of children featured in influencer marketing campaigns. Among the most common measures were as follows:

- To require a new directive for children's privacy protection;
- To avoid sharing photos of underage children without parental consent;
- To have educational campaigns for parents and raise awareness about privacy and safety on social media;
- Introduce children's consent of their photos and videos at an earlier age than 18.
- Cover/Blur underage children's faces on photos and/or videos.

## Conclusion

In order for each individual to protect their privacy on social networks and avoid the potential risks associated with sharing information online, it is necessary to control the content that is posted on the platforms, to set the privacy of the profiles on the platforms accordingly, that is to say regulates which people can have access to the content that is shared, to limit contacts only to people who know each other in real life, to use appropriate passwords for their profiles and of course to think carefully before sharing certain personal information or photographs.

The general conclusion of our research on the perception of parents about Instagram influencers using children's photos for marketing purposes in North Macedonia is that children's content is frequently shared on social media, specifically on the platform Instagram. Influencers tend to include their children in their campaigns and share their images and videos for commercial purposes to increase likes and audience engagement. However, exposing children frequently on social media comes with its own risks including endangering their privacy and safety and possibly exposing them to perpetrators. Moreover, our study has shown that

generally influencer marketing can impact children's perceptions and behaviors. Influencers who choose to use their children's photos for marketing purposes should do so with care, responsibility, and consideration of the potential consequences. It's important to strike a balance between creating engaging content and protecting the privacy and well-being of their children. Therefore, it is essential for influencers and parents in general to consider the potential impact on their children and to maintain a healthy balance between their online presence and privacy.

Finally, in order to effectively regulate the influence of social media, the following measures are of fundamental importance: open communication, setting boundaries, promoting appropriate digital education in schools, especially regarding online safety, digital literacy for all generations, and constant dialogue between parents and children and achieving a balance between online and offline communication. Parents need to be aware of how social media affects their lives and use the platforms in a way that strengthens bonds with children rather than harming them.

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