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Reinventing Child Labour: A Contemporary Analysis of Children's Participation in The Digital Labour Economy

By

Bayan Kojok

A Major Research Paper
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the Department of Communication, Media and Film in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2022

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Reinventing Child Labour: A Contemporary Analysis of Children's Participation in The Digital Labour Economy

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October 7th, 2022

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ABSTRACT

This major research paper explores the historical shifts in labour and childhood, highlighting children's ongoing implication in the capitalist market. My focus is influencer marketing, the newest form of digital work. The onset of social media and the introduction of the "influencer" is a cultural and political-economic shift that has expanded the definition of labour, whether this form of labour is widely recognized or not. The Instamom has emerged from this redefinition of labour; these individuals have curated influencer status by advertising their life as a mom on social media, particularly Instagram. This becomes problematic as children are inherently involved in the income-generating labour process, and there are no laws protecting children from possible exploitation. In addition to labour, children are also unable to consent to having a permanent digital footprint which poses an ethical threat. There exists a substantial body of research and literature on the topic of child labour. Yet, there remains a fixation on child labour in the form of physical exploitation of children while corporations profit. Many international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) outline the risks and hazards associated with child labour to fight for children's rights and lobby for rigorous labour laws. While childhood and child labour within research and advocacy groups is understood as static and physical, this project presents alternate theorizations. I identify four subthemes that will be critically analyzed: Sponsored posts, candid photos, baby bump pictures, and relatable posts. Combined, all four themes showcase how children perform a necessary form of labour in this new social media economy I conclude the inclusion of children in Instamom content constitutes a form of labour and requires recognition as such for a legislative response.

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INTRODUCTION

Conceptualizations of what is considered "labour" have shifted considerably throughout history, usually in reaction to changes in the cultural, social, economic, or political climate. Where labour was once tangible, the mushrooming social media landscape has introduced new modes of labour and production. The introduction of digital platforms, such as Instagram, and e-commerce and economies created therein, has provided spaces in which immaterial labour—in the form of brand collaborations, microblogging, and corporate partnerships (to name a few)—can be monetized by everyday users. The growing scope of immaterial labour has accelerated much faster than traditional labour laws, which are still chiefly concerned with physical exploitation. This disconnect makes it increasingly difficult to protect the basic human rights of labourers, which perpetuates capitalist exploitation, and, as my analysis will demonstrate, presents considerable risks for those with limited means of protection, including children.

Drawing from the ballooning trend of "Instamom," this study will challenge traditional conceptions of child labour exploitation as only relating to physical exploitation. By drawing on the increasing use of children as a means of monetization on social media through the Instamom, I assert an expanded definition of child labour wherein the immaterial work of children via their mere visibility on digital platforms is understood as exploitative. Central questions that motivate this exploration are: What is the role of children in the neoliberal entrepreneurial venture of mommy blogging? If parents or guardians directly impose this work initiation without obtaining adequate consent, what are the ethical implications? How might expanded definitions of child labour aid in the protection and recognition of children within digital economies?

By critically examining the Instagram pages of Instamom accounts, this analysis will highlight the pervasiveness of influencer marketing and the immaterial labour of creative fields, with a specific emphasis on analyzing children's contributions to their mother's posts and thus overall self-brand. This will contextualize the child's involvement in modern day digital neoliberal labour and concede the ways in which child labour has been reinvented. Instamoms create a sense of community with their followers, akin to conventional mommy blogs in the past that served as a safe space to discuss the realities of motherhood. However, where historically mommy blogs relied on the written form, the phenomenon has restructured to adapt to Instagram's economy of visibility. As influencer marketing continues to make great strides in major digital platforms, children are becoming increasingly involved in these marketing strategies, especially during the pandemic which saw an explosion of digital influencer economies. Protected under the guise of having their own child's welfare in mind, mothers posting their children within their Instagram content are often left unquestioned. Moreover, because influential Instamoms have legions of followers via self-branding premised on trust and reliability, the influencer's inclusion of her children will be well-received within the community as it insinuates intimacy and trust that the influencer feels towards her audience—after all, why would a mother seek to put their own child in harm's way? However, labour under capitalism, by definition, produces surplus (profit) for *some else*, which is precisely the dynamic at play when children are central to monetized Instagram accounts.

My research question is two-fold: (1) how are mommy bloggers utilizing self-branding marketing tactics to build trust and create a legion of mommy followers? (2) How do these tactics implicate children and render them vulnerable to labour and privacy exploitation? I argue that two power relations have formed: the power of assurance that digital neoliberal self-branding tactics promises to mommy bloggers as a means of securing income, and second, the power that mommy bloggers have over their children in including them within their posts without receiving consent from said children to be included in the value-generating labour process. Both power dynamics intersect. Mommy bloggers rely on entrepreneurial self-branding tactics for financial success; meanwhile, these self-branding tactics include their children in the labour process without considering inevitable labour and privacy exploitation from their participation. While the average Instagram user may not see children's presence in their mother's Instagram account as a form of labour, and thus an uneven power dynamic, it certainly is the case and needs to be addressed as such. Unacknowledged labour is distressing on its own, however it becomes an ethical dilemma when coupled with the inability to provide informed consent vis-a-vis one's participation in the labour economy and one's permanent digital footprint. To establish familiarity with current research and my investigation, I will begin by reviewing the literature. Then, I will shift to an analysis which will contextualize existing research from the literature review with identified subthemes. Finally, I will conclude by discussing my findings and offering further notes for discussion and future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historical and present-day manifestations of child labour, particularly as it presents as the physical exploitation of children in the name of profit, is well-documented. Widely held understandings of child labour harken images of sooten-faced children working in factories during the 18th and 19th centuries or children in parts of the present-day Global South, working in suboptimal conditions to carry, scour, and transport objects or physical commodities. Indeed, these images are amplified by national and international organizations, such as the International Labour Organization (2012) that stipulate that child labour:

> [D]eprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development… is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work. ("What is Child Labour")

Organizations such as the ILO function to highlight the hazards of child labour, including its most grotesque manifestations (such as child pornography or prostitution) and are essential in advocating for children's welfare. What is excluded from these dominant child protection agencies that seek to advocate for children and protect them from capital exploitation are notions of immaterial labour, particularly, how children can be used to accumulate digital capital on social media platforms.

The proceeding sections of this literature review will consider the history of childhood and various notions of labour, to investigate how Instamom cultures propagate and profit from the immaterial labour of children to generate surplus values (Rangan, 2011). By examining the social construction of childhood, I will illuminate the ways in

which capitalism and childhood have always been intertwined. I will then investigate the reconstruction of labour and how this has historically shifted as a result of machinery, innovation, and labour resistance. These shifts will highlight how labour functions in a contemporary digital landscape, and will, in turn, extend traditional interpretations of "labour" beyond the exploitation of physical work. By using the "Instaparent" community as a case population, and by examining the practice of sharing pictures of children on social media, this study will glean this reformulation of labour in which self-branding and digital notoriety are positioned as a new form of capital.

The Historical Social Construction of Childhood

The concept of 'childhood' has been widely studied across an array of disciplines. While one may conceptualize childhood as an inherently biological phase in development, interdisciplinary research has provided alternate readings and deem it to be a social construction rather than a natural state of being. The idea that childhood is a social construct is the lens that I will be adopting throughout my major research paper as it places childhood in parallel to its cultural and political-economic terrain, rather than seeing it as a phase of one's life that is absolved of the nefarious realities of the "real world"—a fantasy that, according to Giroux (2006) "allows adults to believe that children do not suffer from adult greed, recklessness, perversions of will and spirit" (p. 129).

Steinberg (1997) rightfully highlights that childhood is both a social and historical construct. She walks us through the pivotal historical moment in the 20th century when children were removed from factories and placed in school, officially separating them from adults. This shift from work to school is also echoed by Stearns (2016), who advises

that schooling became the prominent characteristic of modern childhood. Kline (1993) likewise posits that the transition from working alongside adults to compulsory schooling is critical as "it marks a period when the state was not only prescribing protective buffers for childhood but beginning to assert its own 'interest' in social communication with children" (p. 48). As Stearns points out, prior to the 19th century, children would be expected to be active contributors to the family's economic development at an early age, a fundamental undertaking in agricultural societies (p. 55). When children were removed from the workplace and placed in school, they no longer had the time to be financial contributors to their family's income; rather, they became financial liabilities (Stearns, p. 55). James (1997) states that prior to the end of the 18th century, child labour was never questioned; on the contrary, it was praised as society deemed it to be a way to teach children about moral, economic and social principles (p. 38). James then discusses how this rhetoric quickly changed by the end of the century, entailing in the denormalization of wage-earning children and seeing child labour as children being denied their "childhood" (p. 38).

This sentiment by child labour reformers was met with resistance from those who saw children as useful participants within the household, especially as children's roles as economic contributors in a household was not only necessary in the late-19th century, but was also a legitimate social practice (Zelizer, 1981). The divide between a child's idyllic sentimental value and their potential to earn an additional income for the household culminated in an ambiguous redefinition of what constituted appropriate and inappropriate economic participation by children (Zelizer, 1981, p. 58). The institutional

influences that helped create Western "childhood" as we know it today cannot go unacknowledged, as we will see further along.

What is important to note is that this reassessment of wage-earning children did not apply to the creative industries and children employed in the growing 20th-century entertainment industry. Colclough (2016) ascertains that, while legislation became more concerned with child welfare, the entertainment industry was overlooked (p. 44). On the contrary, she states that "at the precise time when child laws were believed to be addressing the issue of child labour, the recruitment of child performers not only gained momentum but also became more rigorous and extensive" (p. 44). This is unsurprising when we consider the introduction of compulsory schooling and children's new role within the family unit—no longer financial contributors, but rather financial burdens. This legislation constrained children's availability in the workforce as school hours cut directly into labour hours and limited the kinds of work that children could undertake. The entertainment industry became a family's economic salvation, oftentimes being the only source of income for the family as the dominant wage-earner was employed seasonally. The entertainment industry, even in the Victorian Entertainment industry era, saw children's profitability. As Colclough notes, "childhood was the industry's new commodity and only children could convincingly sell this to the public. The commercial potential of children deemed them indispensable to the industry" (p. 45). Despite this, there were still some individuals who did not agree with the ethos of the wage-earning child—part of the criticism against child performers stemmed from suspicions that parents were spending their children's earnings on alcohol rather than family necessities (p. 45).

These suspicions and the public's criticism against exploitation of the wage-earning child in the entertainment industry underpinned Coogan's Law. The Coogan Law, named after child actor Jackie Coogan, was put into place when Coogan realized, after the death of his father, that all his earnings as a child actor were gone. At the time, the earnings of a minor belonged to the parent. After filing a lawsuit against his mother and his former manager for his earnings, the Coogan Law was put into place in 1939 to protect young performers from financial exploitation (SAGAFTRA). The importance of protecting children within the entertainment industry has progressed. In Ontario, for example, the "Protecting Child Performers Act" prescribes that should a child performer earn more than $2000 on a project or acquire a lifetime earnings of over $5000, 25% of the amount will be set aside by the employer and held in trust until the child performer reaches the age of 18. In addition to the financial rules put in place, these regulations also establish appropriate working hours, working conditions, and an age limit to work within the entertainment industry (Government of Ontario, Ministry of Labour, Occupational Health, and Safety Branch, 2017).

While the entertainment industry exists to this day, it has evolved considerably in the era of social media. This new form of entertainment blurs the lines between labour and leisure, which makes it increasingly difficult to not only pinpoint where leisure ends and labour begins, but also to implement laws to regulate the employment of children within it. By understanding the immaterial labour and financial opportunities bestowed upon children who are featured in their parents' social media posts, we could then begin to implement regulations to repudiate the exploitation of children within the digital realm.

Steinberg (1997) reminds us that childhood is not a stagnant state of being but is dynamic to its social, cultural, political, and economic terrain. Therefore, it is imperative for researchers to be aware of these influences. Childhood as a socio-historical construct is a notion echoed by Kincheloe (2011) who notes the ways in which a child's role has changed as they became more independent as the caretaker is forced to work longer hours in order to sustain a livable wage, resulting in a lack of parental guidance (p. 44). This lack of parental guidance was the result of an upsurge in single-parent homes, stagnating wages, and inflation in living costs during the 1980s and 1990s. These material realities, coupled with children's accessibility to technology and media resulted in what Kincheloe calls "the postmodern childhood" (p. 45).

It is important to note that the media associated with Kincheloe's postmodern childhood was television, not internet, mobile, or social media. While the former introduced accessibility to knowledge to all ages, the latter accelerates this accessibility. This childhood is guided by knowledge that, at one point in time, was only privy to adults. This is best exemplified by Kincheloe, who states that "as media push the infinite proliferation of meaning, boundaries between childhood and adulthood fade as children and adults negotiate the same mediascape and struggle with the same impediments to meaning-making" (Kincheloe, 2011). Postman (1994) previously articulated similar ideas, suggesting that the arrival of television eroded the line between adulthood and childhood. Postman advises that there are three factors for this erosion, with undifferentiated accessibility being the underlying denominator for each: "first, because it requires no instruction to grasp its form; second, because it does not make complex demands on either mind or behavior; and third, because it does not segregate its

audience" (p. 80). So, we find ourselves with a medium of communication that has become increasingly accessible, convenient, and inclusive, no matter the age. While this might appear to be a textbook definition of an equitable form of communication, it needs to be nuanced with the fact that television makes public what was once private (Postman, 1994 p. 83), and therefore allows children and adults to revel in the same content that was once only privy to specific groups. Furthermore, Postman also directs our attention to the fact that television not only eroded the lines between children and adults through its form and context but has actively reflected the decline of "childhood" through its content (p. 120).

This ethos of complete disclosure coupled with their accessibility to media not only affects children's meaning making process, but also places them directly in the line of vision of marketers and advertisers. Cook (2000) analyzes various market research literatures dating from the 1910s–1990s to show how children were being depicted as not only autonomous individuals, but autonomous consumers (p. 487). He points out that merchants, manufacturers, and advertisers began to target children directly as autonomous consumers in the 1930s (p. 488). Prior to this, merchants would only have experience with children as customers rather than consumers: "the former indicating a role enacted somewhat regularly at the point of commercial transactions, the latter designating a continuous identity regardless of whether purchases are being made at any given moment" (Cook, 2000, p. 492). This new ascription to the reconceptualization of "childhood" initiated a calculated effort to understand the inner workings of children in order to curate an array of goods and services that could be targeted directly to them (Cook, 2000, p. 489). However, what is most important to note about these new interests

are the ways in which children's new roles as consumers led to yet another redefinition of "the child," this time as "a being who possesses pre-social, naturalized desires for consumer goods" (Cook, 2000, p. 490). This calculated process to naturalize a consumerist identity amongst children ultimately culminates in what we now know as "children's culture."

This new strand of culture did not coincidentally come to be. Rather, it was produced for children, and then pushed onto them (Kline, 1993, p. 44), a feat that could not be accomplished in a previous historical setting as it was incompatible with cultural and institutional norms. While children's culture did not make itself overtly known, we could see its early roots dating back to the 20th century, around the same time that compulsory schooling was implemented. It was at this time where a noticeable expansion of children's organizations came to be, with underlying objectives that sought to instill a specific set of social skills, values, etc. (Kline, 1993). In fact, these organizations targeted children of a lower socioeconomic background as organizers grew distrustful of said children should they have too much time on their hands, and so they saw organized play and structured activities as a way of preparing them for competitive society, negotiation, and class mingling (Kline, p. 51). Bearing this in mind, long before social media we saw evidence that innocent "play" could arguably be referred to as "work of childhood" (Kline, p. 51).

By the late 20th century "play" and consumerism became intertwined, especially when Congress announced the suspension of Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) proposal to ban unfair ads directed to children in 1980. This suspension served as the outset for further deregulation that allowed for longer commercials, along with the

production of cartoons by toy companies to feature new toys (Cross, 2002, p.443). These material goods manufactured an entire consumer culture directed towards children, which contributed to shaping the ways that children were socialized, much like organized play did back earlier in the 20th century. Kline rightly points out that play has been captured by mass marketers and consumerism. Where children once used their imaginations or tapped into a cultural memory to create scenarios for play, they now rely on manufactured toys and/or television narratives ensuing in a scripted play. If the early-20th-century's enactment of compulsory schooling and the implementation of child labour laws were meant to preserve childhood "innocence" from the realm of capitalism, then one could suggest that late-20th-century children's culture is a regression of this so-called innocence, as it is directly tied to commodities and capitalistic demands.

This brings us to yet another marketplace-motivated reconceptualization of the Western childhood, the "empowered child." According to Cook (2005), the exploited child is placed in juxtaposition to the empowered child. The exploited child is inscribed with adult fears regarding the destructive nature of capitalism and has long since been a politician's moral positionality (p. 156). In stark contrast, the empowered child has agency and makes their own meaning of culture. The child, then, becomes a symbol of hope, rather than fear regarding the structure and locations of power in the world (p. 156). What must be considered is the fact that the rhetoric of agency among children within consumer culture also enables organizations to define "childhood" in and through a commercial lens (p. 156). The "empowered child" is a lucrative construct as it becomes corporations' moral safeguard and justifications when directly targeting children with their advertising messages and campaigns, as they know that a child who adopts

consumerist behaviours is essential to business (p. 156). Schor (2004) similarly notes how marketers have employed a child-centric view that professes belief in the autonomy and power of youth, rather than seeing them as beings that needs to be protected from the adult world (p. 203). This rhetoric is only compatible in the postmodern era as parenting styles became less authoritarian, and provided a chance for children to choose and voices their opinions on consumer products for the family, deeming it to be a "learning opportunity" (p. 24). Schor describes this form of kid-fluence as an influencer market and notes how lucrative this market is to marketers (p. 24).

This profitability is also highlighted in the Media Education Foundation's documentary 'Consuming Kids' (2009). The narrator explains within the first few minutes of the film that the biggest reasons why marketers' have afforded such an interest in marketing to children stems from the amount of adult spending that American kids under 12 directly influence. The commercialization of media, paired with informed consumerism among children makes children fair game to marketers and advertisers, who have begun adopting stealthier strategies to appeal to children (Wasko, 2008, p. 462), from hiring child psychologists to learn more about the psyche of children, to planning yearly conferences dedicated to discussing strategies to tap into children's buying power. This effort makes sense, especially when we consider just how profitable children's culture has become—so much so, that marketers have colonized the "magic" and "innocence" of childhood as a selling point for products ranging from toys, games, clothing etc. (Langer, 2002, p. 74). While children were once sacralised and efforts were made to separate them from the commercial world, we now see an inverted sacralization

where the market has become sacralised, and children are deemed “sacred” by virtue of their spending power (Langer, 2002, p. 78).

What this asserts, which is of relevance to this analysis, is that the notion of childhood takes various forms all depending on context-specific conditions of the period in which children are studied. Because childhood is not stagnant and possesses a plural identity that is shaped and defined by its socio-cultural and economic framework, it is important to dissect the historical foundations of childhood before contextualizing it in our current era. With the historical background provided, and in situating children in our contemporary hyper-capitalist neoliberal digital global political economy, I will seek to highlight an under-researched component of childhood—direct economic participation by their mere presence in Instagram content. While child labour was once exemplified through factory work, I argue that it needs to be looked at with a critical and contemporary lens. Throughout Western childhood’s entire reconfiguration, the common denominator that remained was the ways in which children can generate capital. The historical shift from “small adult” to “child” was a social construct conducted on moral grounds suggesting that children were far too innocent to be subjected to the hardships of the adult work, and thus child labour could no longer be conducted. The rhetoric of a child’s innocence and purity is one that resonates to this day. However, child labour has never been removed; as I argue, it continues to thrive now more than ever as innocent childhood, including childhood play, turns into a form of value-generating work on social media. This entrepreneurial labour is not only encouraged in our neoliberal political economy, but it is stemming from the most profoundly ideological influence in a child’s

life: their parent's participation in the immaterial labour of social media content production.

Construction and Reconstruction of Labour: The Worker-Capital Dichotomy

Much like the concept of "childhood," "labour" should also be understood within specific historical contexts. At one point in time, labour consisted of utilizing nature as a means of survival via activities such as hunting and fishing. Slowly but surely, this progressed into craftsmanship, or "the professional worker," according to Dyer-Witheford (1999) which allowed people to make a living by building a limited supply of items (p. 143). This not only introduced bartering between both the buyer and seller, but also created an intimacy of sorts between the product, the buyer, and the seller. The industrial revolution shifted this type of labour, as factories encouraged mass production while labourers remained invisible to, and became distanced from, consumers. This is what Dyer-Whiteford calls the "mass worker" (p. 143), who as Sayers (2007) asserts becomes a participant within capitalism's massive labour shift, especially with the introduction of machinery (p. 440).

Unlike the professional worker, the mass worker is no longer creating whole products, but is confined to a specific department that focuses on a fragment of the product. This segmentation of labour is characteristic of Fordism, which according to Jessop (1992) "refers to a particular configuration of the technical and social division of labour involved in making long runs of standardized goods" (p. 42). Henry Ford sought to lay out formulaic labour divisions with the goals of achieving an increase in productivity. The goal of mass production is directly influenced by mass consumption, which at the time was becoming normative due to mass media's influence over society:

“commercial capital has a key role in establishing the links between mass producers and mass demand via mass advertising, mass retailing, mass credit, consumer research, etc.” (Jessop, 1992, p. 45). While we can ascertain that labour has shifted periodically, we must also contextualize these shifts within their specific socio-economic contexts, while also highlighting workers’ resistance against these shifts. This becomes increasingly important as we note the ways in which the mass workers’ modes of resistance enforced a restructuring of capital as well, resulting in the undertaking of pervasive modes of labour, or as Dyer-Witheford (1999) calls them “the socialized worker” (p. 143). This restructuring as Burgmann (2013) states, “constituted an attack on the homogeneity of the working class by beginning to break down the large factories and disperse the mass workers throughout the whole space and time of society” (p. 181).

The socialized worker, who emerges from post-Fordism, is not bound to a typology of labour that is distinguishable from activities conducted within their private sphere; rather the two hemispheres blend. The socialized worker’s everyday life is constantly motivated by the production process, making labour and leisure indistinguishable from one another (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 157). Due to neoliberalism’s laissez-faire ethos, which encourages deregulation and the privatization of services with little to no government interference, an individualism among citizens begins to form. It is the very combination of individualistic values, a continuous flow of technological advancements, and a neoliberal political economy that combines both the public and private sphere with a profit-driven goal that allows for a new strand of labour: immaterial labour. Lazzarato (1996) advises that immaterial labour can be understood as “the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity”

(Lazzarato, p. 77). In this sense, as Arvidsson (2005) points out, “the post-Fordist production process directly exploits the communitarian dimension of social life” (p. 241). This exploitation is important to keep in mind, especially when investigating the phenomenon of social media, self-branding, and the importance of social capital. In the current environment, children no longer need to go to a physical workplace to become labourers; their leisure playtime, and all facets of their home lives can also constitute a form of labour when and if it is captured and monetized on social media. What is equally as important to note as we place children directly within the realm of this revised form of labour is the fact that while capitalism has restructured itself by and through workers’ resistance to its demands, children do not protest, nor do they unionize. They are not protected by labour laws but are protected by adults who view them as fragile, innocent beings. This leaves children increasingly vulnerable to exploitation due to the very fact that they are unable to see and oppose their own exploitation, as the adults in their lives are the ultimate decision-makers.

Authenticity, Self-Branding and Calibrated Amateurism

Social media’s progression has introduced us to a reformulated conception of success that does not seem completely outside of the realm of possibility to attain: the influencer. As individualistic beliefs continue to infiltrate communities, self-branding becomes increasingly encouraged as a means of securing one’s place in society. While products are commonly branded, this individualistic mindset that has become characteristic of our contemporary economy of visibility has invited the self to become brandable as well. These values promote a faux sense of entrepreneurial self-reliance, while also encouraging citizens of the world to adopt the ideology of the “American

dream" which suggests that, should you work hard enough, success is attainable. What this invites is an onus on individuals should they not be able to achieve the same levels of success that others have, while backgrounding the systemic apparatuses at play that grant access to this success for some and obstructs it for others.

Simmons (2008) posits that "in postmodern culture, the self is essentially decentred, preferring the ability to switch images and utilise consumption as a means of constructing powerful images liberating them from monotony and conformity" (para 4). As the postmodern individual becomes more and more decentered, identity is fabricated through the consumption of specific trends and styles of the time. As consumers continue to build their identities through consumption, they begin to build value for brands that goes beyond the transaction. This results in what Lazzarato calls "ethical surplus," a concept that Arvidsson (2005) also utilizes in his critical assessment of brand value. The concept of ethical surplus could be understood as a social construct of shared meanings and/or a sense of belonging that "feeds into the post-Fordist production process by providing a temporary context that makes the production or the realization of value possible" (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 241).

These cultural shifts, combined with the neoliberal individualistic political terrain of the contemporary era culminates in the employment of marketing strategies involving the social media influencer. The social media influencer has become an annex for brands to reach consumers on an intimate level, due to its perceived "organic" nature. This perception is realized through the self-branding process, where the notion of "authenticity" becomes indispensable. Because brands are realizing that a relationship built on affect is much more profitable in the contemporary marketplace, they want to

construct relationships built on the foundational characteristic of any successful relationship: trust. This not only invites consumers to purchase their products but perpetuates the churning of the wheel of affect as they continue to prescribe meanings onto the brand by discussing it with their friends and posting it online. This is reaffirmed by Banet-Weiser (2012) who states that "building a brand is building an affective, authentic relationship with a consumer, one based—just like a relationship between two people—on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations" (p. 8). While the notion of identifying yourself as a brand may not have been historically accepted, it is one that is both normalized and encouraged in our contemporary era. Banet-Weiser argues that "the contemporary era is one that focuses on the individual entrepreneur, 'free' to be an activist, a consumer, or both" (p. 37).

This illusionary freedom, premised on the possibility of achieving success that was once only reserved to celebrities entices digital users to build and craft their own brand, often utilizing the same strategies that marketers employ—a sentiment also shared by Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017), who state that self-branding and marketing are inevitably tied together. Through their analysis of "instafame," Khamis and co-authors discuss the possibilities that social media extends to "ordinary" people to achieve a "micro-celebrity" status. While previously associated with the realm of reality television, the micro celebrity can now be characterized as an individual who utilizes self-branding tactics to create a bond with an audience in hopes of creating visibility—an important feat within the attention economy Zulli (2018) iterates that attention has become one of the most valuable resources in capitalism today and that after the advent of digital technology, and social media sites, being watched and receiving attention by others became as valuable as

watching and giving attention to others (p. 140). This is especially true with platforms such as Instagram, where user partnerships are dependent on the glance, and becomes users' measure of economic value. Bearing this in mind, the attention economy rationalizes self-disclosure and the idea of being watched, which are essential branding tactics for micro-celebrities. According to Marwick (2013), the micro-celebrity:

> Is an emerging online practice that involves creating a persona, sharing personal information about oneself with others, performing intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness, acknowledging an audience and viewing them as fans, and using strategic reveal of information to increase or maintain this audience. (p. 13)

This persona goes hand in hand with the idea of authenticity, however it elicits a specific form of authenticity, a calculated one. Due to the interconnected nature of a successful digital self-brand and perceived authenticity, it comes as no surprise that many will attempt to employ calculated strategies to appear relatable to their fanbase. This process is what Pooley (2010) calls "calculated authenticity" which he briefly describes as "being instrumental about authenticity" (p. 79). This suggests that rather than being organic, authenticity is formulaic and distinct steps need to be followed to attain this. The trustworthy nature of successful social media influencers, who have accumulated large fan-bases as a result of a perceived trust from the audience makes it so that brands need only locate accounts with a large following and insert their products within them. In other words, brands piggyback off influencers' perceived authenticity in exchange for sponsorships, a strategy that alludes the skeptic consumer as it is perceived as "not commercial" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 10).

A critical constituent of a successful self-brand is what Banet-Weiser (2012) calls "self-disclosure" (p. 60). As the name suggests, self-disclosure involves disclosing every

facet of one's life online, so as to generate trust and relatability to the viewers. In addition to self-disclosure, Banet-Weiser identifies "lifecasting" as an equally important strategic practice when constructing a successful self-brand. One becomes a lifecaster when they are constantly recording and displaying their everyday lives through digital media—it has become the ultimate self-branding strategy where the "self" becomes the product, and this "self" is promoted and sold by individual entrepreneurs (p. 76). This ongoing digital autobiography allows the content creator to control what they want the audience to see, under the false premise that they are providing their audience with candid narratives. The digital self is also one that is constructed and reconstructed by and through audience feedback, a process that Banet-Weiser recognizes: "the Internet and its innumerable appendages rely on a dynamic between self and others that results in self-construction" (p. 61). This results in a constructed sense of self, one that is built off cultural norms and acceptance rather than an internal discovery. The interconnectedness of self-branding and perceived authenticity is echoed in Tseëlon's (1992) analysis of Goffman's "presentation of the self" (p. 121). By applying a postmodern framework, Tseëlon contends that "the Goffmanesque self is postmodern in that it consists of surfaces, or performances… a social product which does not have existence outside of interaction" (Tseëlon, p. 121). If interactivity is indeed the building blocks to construct one's postmodern selfhood, marketers have located a gold mine. Social media influencers are also becoming more and more lucrative to marketers due to their presence over multiple social media platforms, resulting in an unprecedented global reach.

Because social media platforms inherently invite users to self-segment through the process of following pages, tracking likes etc., we find ourselves in an environment

where Serazio's (2013) "cool-sell" strategy can flourish (p. 4). The essence of the cool sell strategy is "advertising that does not seem like advertising" (Serazio, 2013, p. 3). Rather than consumers feeling as though they are being inundated with advertisements, which would deter them from the marketing message, the cool sell strategy manages to orchestrate the marketing message within the consumers' everyday routine so as to appear as though the consumer found the message themself. In this sense, as social media users engage with the interface of the platform and scroll through their feed they are inadvertently exposed to advertisements that may not explicitly be seen as such. Similar to music, movies and TV shows, influencers can also be categorized under specific sub genres.

The genre interrogated by this major research paper is what Abidin (2017) calls the "family influencer," an emerging and extremely profitable genre of micro-celebrity (p.1). The family influencer produces humourous content, while also allowing viewers into their daily routines as a form of "calibrated amateurism" (p. 1). According to Abidin, calibrated amateurism is "a practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice" (p. 1). This calculated staging of being an amateur is extremely lucrative for influencers, especially if we consider that the historical debut of creative content creators on such platforms were known as passionate, unpaid amateurs (p. 6). The purpose of this amateurism is to convey a sense of relatability to the fanbase, especially as influencers become more comfortable and tactful in their craft (p. 6). Like calculated authenticity,

calibrated amateurism creates a relationship between content creators and their viewers premised on trust through relatability.

Mommy Blogging and the Uncertain Mother

The profitability of being a social media influencer combines with the profitability of priceless and innocent childhood when we consider the market segment of mothers. This is a market that is built on emotion, as participation stems from a myriad of feelings, ranging from uncertainty to helplessness. Much like the aforementioned act of self-disclosure, mothers share their real-life mothering experiences online, which in turn gain traction with other mothers who went through similar experiences. This built a sense of community amongst the bloggers and readers, which inadvertently formed a relationship built on trust. Initially, the act of mommy blogging was seen as radical due to its resistant ethos, as mothers were opposing the mainstream narrative of motherhood. As posed by Kido Lopez (2009), "instead of the vision of the loving mother, we see women who are frazzled by the demands of their newborn baby, who have no clue what to do when their child gets sick, who suffer from postpartum depression and whose hormones rage uncontrollably" (p. 732). The mommy-blogging community was steadily gaining a mass-audience, and marketers began to take notice of this. When exploring the commercialization of mommy blogs, Hunter (2016) contends that, after a well-known mommy blogger began making a living from her blogs in 2005 by accepting advertising within the content of her blogs, the realm of mommy blogging began to take on a commercial appearance (p. 1309). Many took note of the profitable opportunities that mommy blogging provided, so much that conferences were organized to assist mothers in monetizing their blog. The commercialization of a platform that, in its inception, was

meant for dialogue is justified by the postmodern neoliberal ethos of entrepreneurship and empowerment.

In Atkinson's (2014) analysis on green mothering, she points to the fact that while "motherhood" is a relatively biological phenomenon, more often than not new mothers are trickled by doubt and uncertainty due to external factors:

> The path to a healthy pregnancy is riddled with uncertainty, and motherhood – although natural and biological – continues to be framed in contemporary discourse as skills that must be learned via external sources rather than discovered via innate wisdom. (Atkinson, 2014, p. 553)

This results in a socio-historical construction of motherhood, much like we have seen with childhood. In the 1800s, pregnancy was diagnosed as a disease that required medical attention—attention that could only be sought after by certified doctors to diagnose and prescribe treatment (Atkinson, 2014, p. 556). In time, marketers placed themselves within the equation, constantly advising mothers what they should do, or purchase to ensure the well-being of their child.

The interconnectivity between being a "good" mother and consumption is intensified through sponsored mommy blogs, because a mother is heeding advice from a fellow mother who appears to be authentic. Because blogging encouraged community and connection, marketers and PR practitioners alike saw its commercial value and began to label mothers as consumers and mom bloggers as influencers and producers of suitable content to advertise products—this results in a change in both the practice and the virtual place, from a public sphere free of commodities to a marketplace (Archer, 2019, p. 160). This shared component creates an intimacy that cannot be emulated by standard commercials, which intrinsically leads to affective labour and profit. A study conducted by *Forbes* magazine in 2017 highlights this, as it showed that 83% of new moms are

millennials who look online for parenting advice through social media and other parents' product recommendations—of this demographic, 43% of these moms' state that they trust the recommendations of other mothers (Carter, 2017).

Sharenting, Labour and Privacy Concerns

As we place children within the conceptual framework of the literature review, we are able to distinguish that, within our contemporary era, they are exposed to a very specific type of labour through the "Instamom." While my case study will focus on "successful" Instamom accounts, meaning ones who have amassed a considerable fan base that would attract marketers to form partnerships with them, we should also keep in mind that "ordinary'" individuals are also contributing to this cycle by accruing capital for the platform by providing content (posting) and feedback (comments, likes, follows etc.). Other than the fact that much of the 21st-century neoliberal digital labour often goes unnoticed due to its immaterial composite, it also poses an additional ethical question: that of privacy concerns and consent. If our offline identities are being shaped by the ones we curate online, and transparency is not only encouraged but necessary for our self-brand, then we find ourselves in a catch-22 where privacy is concerned.

Kokolakis' (2015) analysis on privacy attitudes and privacy behaviour reflects what is commonly known as the "privacy paradox" (p. 122). Kokolakis reveals that while people claim to be concerned about data collection and privacy online, they are willing to trade this information for small rewards. It is this very dualism of attitudes towards privacy versus behaviours that contradict these attitudes that shapes the privacy paradox. This paradox is extended to the realm of the successful Instamom who has amassed a considerable following and necessitates a public account that anyone can view, placing

the child directly in the unknown public's eye. In a perfect world online predators would not exist; however the fact of the matter is that the internet is saturated with users who may not have the best intentions in mind. What is equally problematic is the fact that Instagram also provides geo-location tagging, which Instamoms utilize as well. The "offline" mommy blogger, or the mommy blogger who is no longer in front of a screen may be weary of providing so much information to strangers, however the convergence of one's public and private sphere along with the commercialization of the virtual community makes it so that she is caught within this privacy paradox.

Another component that needs consideration is that of "sharenting" and consent. The term sharenting can be understood as parents sharing online. As Brosch (2018) discusses in her analysis on sharenting "parents very often shape their children's digital identity even before their birth, by posting sonogram images of their unborn children" (p. 76). Should we keep in mind that, as previously mentioned, 83% of new moms are millennials it comes to no surprise that a child's digital identity is formed at such a young age—after all, the contemporary era is one that invites self-disclosure. This is not an attempt to villainize those who engage with this form of disclosure, however it is worth studying further due to its contagious nature. Both Holiday, Norman, and Densley (2020) and Brosch (2018) adopt the "extended self" theoretical lens to explain why parents post pictures of their children online, despite privacy concerns. Within this lens, we can detect the notion of the child's identity being embedded within the parent's identity, rather than being independent.

We also navigate crossroads between law and ethics when bearing in mind that one's digital footprint cannot be erased within North America. While the European Union

passed “the right to be forgotten,” a bill that states that “personal data must be erased immediately where the data are no longer needed for their original processing purpose, or the data subject has withdrawn his consent and there is no other legal ground for processing” (GDPR, 2016). Despite numerous proposals over the years, there are yet to be any laws put in place that mirror the EU, with Canada also deeming it as ‘unconstitutional’ (Picotte-Li, 2019). The ambiguous nature of online platforms and the permanence that the act of posting oneself entails requires informed consent.

A child should have agency to choose when and if they want a digital footprint, however the normalized trend of sharenting makes this decision for them before they are able to fully consent. Steinberg (2016) exemplifies how this lack of consent can potentially affect the child in adulthood through the *Sidis v. F-R Publishing* case (p. 859). She details that Sidis, who was a child prodigy received national public attention as a minor, but as an adult he preferred to live a private life. Regardless of his preference, *The New Yorker* ran a story about his life and shared intimate details. Sidis decided that this was an invasion of privacy and chose to sue the magazine company, however the court ruled against Sidis and reasoned that he was a public figure as a child and therefore the public would be interested in the story being published. While courts acknowledge that a child has a right to privacy, parents are the ones who yield the power to control the limitations of the rights to said privacy, and social media platforms provide an abundance of options for parents who seek to place their children in the public eye (p. 861). This becomes even more problematic when we consider the laborious nature of posting, as social media platforms require content to survive.

Therefore, children are not only deprived of choosing when to acquire a digital footprint, but also of participating in digital labour, akin to their historical lack of agency when participating in industrial labour. However, unlike industrial child labour, children's work in the digital realm has yet to be legitimated as "actual" work—this happens in part due to Instaparents' justifications that their children are having fun, that they are consenting to be broadcasted and that they are "normal" children (Abidin, 2017). Acknowledging that children are far too young to make an informed decision on whether or not they want to have a digital footprint and participate in digital labour we can see how privacy and labour concerns are interconnected when it comes to children's presence in the digital sphere. These concerns will persist, and child labor laws and regulations will not be implemented until the work children do on digital platforms is formally recognized as labour. Abidin (2017) notes that children of family influencers are grown in the womb and groomed within the home to inherit the social capital of their Influencer mother and the responsibilities that come with it (p. 2). The ways in which lifestyles are depicted online are calculated and curated in an effort to maximize the potential of paid announcements, as well as the promotion of products that could be completely unrelated to children or parenting. The influencer mother embodies a hyper-commercial strand of sharenting, as she strategically curates the child's identity into being through practices that ask for high exposure and that are commodity driven (Abidin, 2017, p. 2). While I acknowledge that there is no malice on the parent's end when posting pictures of their children, the ethical question still remains. Should these trends remain, a revision of data privacy laws as well as labour laws needs to be conducted with more leniency towards the complete erasure of a digital footprint, especially ones that are non-consensual.

In summary

In sum, my major research paper intends to revisit socio-historical conceptions of childhood and labour by situating these concepts in our contemporary social media landscape. The economists, historians, and sociologists outlined in this literature review provide an interdisciplinary framework in which my project is situated. My work intends to extend child labour discourses within the context of Instamom culture, examining how a form of child labour is leveraged by parents to obtain capital by performing social constructions of innocent childhood, a notion already constructed by capitalism. My project's validation of child labour—both physical and affective—in the context of Instamom culture, and nuanced examination of its material manifestations, including capital, and the permanence of social media content presents an understudied area with important implications for the study of social media, labour, and the ongoing commodification of childhood. While certain scholars mentioned within the literature focus on how capitalism shapes the social construction of innocent childhood, and others discuss how social media celebrities are performing a kind of labour within capitalism, there is little to no work that combines the two to showcase how children's participation in digital platforms sends kids back into labour roles *while simultaneously* keeping them innocent. My major research paper encourages readers to critically assess the interplay between capital and social identities, and how the neoliberal rhetoric of individualism and entrepreneurship prevalent on social media has resulted in a specific strand of child labour that is under scrutinized.

ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDY

The following exploration of Instagram content highlights the way children are not only utilized in, but central to, the self-brands and monetization of Instamoms. Due to the limited scope of a major research paper project, this primary analysis is not intended to be systematic as it does not employ a rigorous sampling or coding method. Rather, my exploratory analysis is intended to illustrate key arguments made throughout the preceding literature review, including: the social construction of innocent childhood; ongoing reconstruction of labour; authenticity, self-branding and calibrated amateurism; Mommy blogging and the uncertain mother; sharenting, labour and privacy concerns.

Keywords and phrases used for searching the images and mom blogger accounts in the Instagram search tab include: sponsored posts, baby products, baby shops, baby bump, baby toys, mom life. Because Instagram accounts with a major following demand constant activity to maintain said following, I opted to examine posts from Instagram accounts that have a following of at least 30,000 followers or more as influencers with a greater reach are scouted by marketers and advertisers. I eventually browsed one hundred Instamom accounts that were posted between 2021-2022 based on these criteria. A visual inspection of the posted images suggested that not all Instamoms post their children, as others are concerned with creative activities that do not directly involve children. While there is a greater emphasis on those who perpetuate immaterial child labor, the issue is also examined through the lens of alternative activities that can be considered one of the most effective means of safeguarding the wellbeing of children. The sections below cross-examine selected accounts thematically to consider the 21st-century form of child labour in the digital realm. The visual content analysed in this section is classified under

four themes, with each supporting how children's presence on their mother's Instagram accounts should be considered a form of capitalist labour. The first theme is sponsored posts, which will not only showcase how content from Instamoms' accounts are monetized and driven by marketing strategies to encourage consumption, but how their children are utilized to promote said product or service. The second theme will examine seemingly candid photos of children that are posted on their social media page, which foregrounds children's innocent participation in daily activities, trips, and other ostensibly "leisure" activities. while backgrounding the immaterial labour that goes into getting each shot. Thirdly, I will analyze relatable captions that are used alongside images to capture the attention of viewers, which demonstrates how audiences are built by using their children as a mobilizing tool. Finally, I will deconstruct the ever-prominent "baby bump" pictures which serves as a tactic to build a rapport between not only the audience and the Instamom, but more importantly the audience and the future child in question. This illustrates how children are used to help build their mother's self-brand even before they are born and have not consented to doing so.

Sponsored Posts and Influencer Marketing

For mommy bloggers, their online community and credibility is achieved by and through parents, whether they be expecting, new, or seasoned. Therefore, brands who will seek them are brands that cater to children's products and services. Evidence from sponsored posts that involve reviews of products produced for children illustrates a form of child labour, as Instamoms include their children in the photo, whether it be holding the item or utilizing it to show its functionality. In this sense, children become an essential medium for earning the wage of the sponsored post. Figures 1.1 and 1.2,

captures the blogger’s son apparently using the product in question, which is lotion for sensitive skin. She enumerates the ingredients in the lotion to highlight the ways in which it is optimal for sensitive skin, while encouraging other mothers to try it. Combining Karen’s following base (which is over 30k) with her credibility as not only a mother but a registered nurse who would presumably have in depth information about the ingredients mentioned, we can see the ways in which her influence on other mothers could impact the choice of skin care products they opt for.

It is evident that the pictures were not taken on a whim, but were strategically arranged, much like Pooley’s (2010) concept of calculated authenticity, where influencers want to portray authentic looking images but need to be instrumental about authenticity (p. 79). We see the display of a specific aesthetic, more specifically colour coordinating the brand’s products with the little boy’s attire. In addition, each shot showcases her son using each product individually. When we consider the immaterial labour that goes behind every shot, and the fact that influencers’ livelihood depends on brand endorsements, one can ascertain that Figure 1.1 and 1.2 showcases a working boy, whether he is aware of it at the time or not. Because of the immaterial nature of this form of labour, it is unrecognized by others as such, which leaves the young boy vulnerable to potential exploitation. As Abidin (2017) rightfully points out, this form of labour continues to be pushed to the backburner as parents justify that their kids are simply having fun. This is exemplified by Figure 2.1 and 2.2, where the mommy blogger who boasts an impressive 174,000 followers (mommyshorts, 2021) takes a picture of her daughter in a candy shop. While a trip to the candy store is nothing out of the ordinary, and in fact invites sentiments of innocence as candy and children are stereotypically

associated with one another, we can quickly see through her post that there were ulterior motives to this seemingly innocent outing. She explains how she took her daughter to the same candy shop chain that was located blocks away from one another and goes on to compare the size of both stores. We can see by the daughter's different attire in each image that this was not done on the same day, unless a change in wardrobe was conducted. While her daughter may have gladly visited both candy stores at her own will, we must foreground the fact that the post was not only sponsored by the candy shop chain but that the mother provided a comparative analysis of both locations within the textual description of the post.

Including her daughter in the post along with the comparative caption allows a sense of authenticity, and echoes Serazio's (2013) "word of mouth" advertising style, as every parent can relate to taking their kids to a candy shop. This authenticity, as Banet-Weiser (2012) posits, is essential for those who want to profit from the platform, as social media is quite literally about capitalizing on social interaction. In this case, we observe the importance of authenticity as well as childhood innocence, which are equally important in order to build intimacy and trust between the influencer and the audience, as well as alleviate criticism when it comes to including her children in posts.

This can also be seen in Figure 2.3, where Ariel Tyson (userhandle arielctyson) who has accumulated 843,000 followers has partnered with HelloFresh, a meal kit organization that provides ready-made boxes with ingredients and recipes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. HelloFresh has collaborated with the Minions, a cartoon franchise, and introduced a Minions inspired pizza making kit, which Ariel is promoting. Ariel showcases how easy it is to make these pizzas, and how fun it could be by allowing six of

her kids to make dinner. She then follows us by encouraging others to share their pizza creations for a chance to win a year's worth of meal kits from HelloFresh. What is displayed is the monetization of childhood exploration, which in this instance presents itself in the form of children wanting to take part in dinner preparations. While childhood exploration is natural and should be implored by parents, when this exploration is paid for by an organization and is themed around a children's movie franchise, one would need to critically assess the motives behind the children's inclusion in the video reel. It could be argued that their involvement would still teach them important culinary skills while instilling a sense of responsibility, all while having fun, and this argument could very well be valid, however as Sheila James Kuehl, a former child star points out "I don't care if it's simply unboxing presents, that's work" (cited in Wong, 2019).

Candid Photos

Candid photos explain why digital celebrities have become more influential than traditional ones through social sites, mainly via Instagram. This photographic genre is popular amongst Instamoms, as sharing these seemingly candid photos of children in their idyllic "natural habitat" alludes to the fact that regardless if the platform existed, their children would conduct their lives in the exact same way. This rhetoric neglects the ever-present immaterial labour that both mother and child must undergo to get the perfect candid shot.

In Figure 3.1 we see two young girls enjoying a day at the beach and jumping over a wave. At surface level, we can ascertain that these young girls are enjoying their time at the beach, and this may very well be the case. However, what remains latent is the immaterial labour that goes behind taking the perfect shot, from orchestrating

simultaneous jumps, and timing it with the waves breaking on the shore. Ironically, the historical removal of children from the labour market made children innocent as they were not tainted by the adult world, but now childhood innocence, exemplified by beach play, turns back into labour and becomes lucrative for influencer marketing. This goes back to Langer's (2002) statement regarding marketers' colonization of the magic and innocence of childhood as a selling point for products (p. 74), only this time the self is being sold rather than products, and the self in this instance is the child. It is also worth noting that the colours portrayed in the photograph are consistent with the account's overall page, from the hues of blue of the ocean and swimsuits, to the smooth tan sand. Maintaining a cohesive Instagram page is not accomplished at random, it is calculated and demands a critical eye to filter out inconsistencies while also requiring assistance from photo editing tools. This cohesiveness can be seen in Figures 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 – these images are pulled from the Instagram feed of three separate accounts, and as we can see from the corresponding figures, the visual aesthetic of each feed follows a specific set of guidelines from colours to theme style, to grid layout. As a number of studies have shown, these strategies involve significant aesthetic labour on the part of content producers, requiring time, new media skills, as well as cultural and economic capital (Duffy, 2016; 2017; Martinez Dy, Marlow, & Martin, 2017; Neff, Sissinger, & Zukin, 2005).

This showcases the immaterial labour that goes into maintaining a self-brand on social media, and once that self-brand includes children then they are inevitably involved in the labour process as well. As shown in Figure 3.5, we can see a young boy fully concentrating on reading a page from what looks to be like an encyclopedia or dictionary

of some sort. At first glance, it appears that the mother simply captured a special moment and wanted to share this with her followers. However, when looking at the boy's body language, I believe this seemingly candid post is carefully posed. The boy's deep trance can be depicted by stereotypical telltale signs of concentration, from the boy's furrowed brows, his focused gaze at the page, and the ever so typical hand resting on cheek. This photo, combined with the accompanying caption that states the mother's amazement of how much her child is growing not only dismisses scrutiny (after all, who can scrutinize a boy trying to build his vocabulary), but also invites a common camaraderie between the mother and other parents who follow her, as the bittersweet feeling of watching your child grow resonates with many. This highlights the staged nature of Instagram, which is unsurprising as identity performances on social media reinforce global consumer culture by engaging in self-branding (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2015).

What we need to bear in mind, however, is that children are being staged within the posts, and are being treated as props in a frame. While Instamoms have autonomy to choose how they choose to present themselves, children do not have this luxury, resulting in an "indirect" self-presentation. Indirect self-presentation involves individuals' use of associates for their own benefit (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt 1988; Cialdini, Finch, & De Nicholas 1990). In the context of the Instamom, her child/ren becomes this associate. Identity performances are carefully constructed to evoke a certain sentiment from audience members, and as Berger and Barasch (2018) advise, observers react more favourably to candid photos as they appear to be more genuine, and as this genuineness involves expressing one's authentic nature, it inevitably builds a common trust between audience members and the influencer.

Figure 3.6 illustrates a very pregnant Tammy Hembrow (userhandle tammyhembrow), shares a sweet moment to her 15.1 million followers that she had with her toddler son. In the photo, they are both sprawled on a black Louis Vuitton towel, while wearing black bathing suits. The mother cradles toddler and plays with his hair, while the boy cuddles near his mother and both look lovingly at one another. Their hair is slicked back and wet and looks as though they decided to lay on the towel after having emerged from the water, which adds onto the candid nature of this photo. However, the coordinated bathing suits and towel along with mother and son's body language opens speculation regarding the genuine candidness of the photo. Berger and Barasch (2018) state that posed photos showcase a polished version of the self, while candid photos allow observers to catch a glimpse inside the real authentic self, so influencers who rely on building a connection with their audience while also maintaining a cohesive and polished visual aesthetic to attract brands will post candid-aware content throughout their feed to continue building that trust. This masks the child labour exerted behind each shot, which contributes to the cyclical nature of immaterial labour that influencers undergo.

Baby Bump Pictures and the phenomenon of the Micro-Micro Celebrity

An influencer's ability to be transparent with their audience is a crucial building block towards the trust-earning process. Transparency requires you to share your vulnerabilities in a way that will resonate with your audience. For expecting mothers, part of these vulnerabilities manifest from their ever-changing physical appearance and/or from their journey to motherhood. In Figure 4.1, Sara (userhandle saratiofficial) posts a video reel for her 589,000 followers. This reel is a montage of her journey to becoming a mother—she documents all the negative pregnancy test results, until she finally receives

the positive test. The montage includes telling her husband of the news, baby bump pictures and seeing her baby in a 3D ultrasound for the first time. Finally, she concludes by showing her baby right after giving birth.

Calculated authenticity is generally curated with the help of Banet-Weiser's (2012) notion of self disclosure, which in sum results in disclosure of various facets of one's life, especially the vulnerable moments. This mimics what Han (2015) calls a "transparency" society, in which "the capitalist economy subjects everything to compulsory exhibition" and the work of self-presentation, "the staging of display, alone generates value" (p. 11). Creating a memory montage for your child, especially the first one, is not unheard of nor malicious in nature. However, intimate moments that were once keepsakes for families and friends have turned into content to promote a self-brand, and this self-brand is inherently dependent on children, as it would not exist without them. This brand, as Banet-Weiser (2012) highlights is premised on affective and authentic relationships with a consumer, one based just like a relationship between two people on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives etc. (p. 8). This entrepreneurial brand building tactic is also exemplified in Figure 4.2, where mommy blogger Catherine McBroom (userhandle catherinemcbroom) who boasts an impressive 7.3 million followers and is the matriarch of the *Ace Family*, a YouTube family channel that often includes their children in their video blogs.

The image in question shows Catherine's introduction of the latest addition to the Ace Family via a photo of her baby bump being caressed by her two young daughters and husband. Because the micro-celebrity is an individual who utilizes self-branding tactics to create a bond with an audience in hopes of creating visibility, it is expected than an

influential mommy blogger would showcase her baby bump as these baby bumps serves as a form of social visibility that embodies the journey of motherhood. This social visibility doubles as work for both mother and child who are both contributing to the self-brand in hopes of maintaining or becoming a micro-celebrity. In addition to assisting mommy's self-brand, the baby is potentially being groomed to follow in her footsteps. Influential mommy bloggers work hard to create a successful self-brand, which inherently creates an intimate bond premised on trust between the influencer and the audience. Because Instamoms' self-brand is dependent on children, the bond between the audience and the self-brand extend to both mommy and the child.

Figure 4.2 displays this bond perfectly, because audience members revert to the photo to express their disbelief that the child is almost one years old. If mommy bloggers market themselves and their children properly, they can open a brand-new portal of financial opportunities under the guise of Abidin's (2017) micro-microcelebrity, which can be summed up as the children of influencers who achieve a certain amount of fame from their influencer mothers. The Ace family is a prime example of this, as they have created profiles for all three of their children who are five, three and one years old, with the lowest following count being 1 million followers. Each account is run by their parents, and each account is monetized, depending on views, for paid sponsorships. A child as young as one years old is unable to comprehend that they are contributing to household finances, nor are they able to consent in doing so. Not to mention, Kokolakis' (2015) privacy paradox comes into play as the Ace Family, and all other influencers who include their children within their posts, or create separate accounts for their children,

trade any concerns vis-à-vis their children's online privacy and data collection for a reward.

In Figure 4.3, we can see that fellow mommy blogger Savannah Labrant, whose Instagram account has a following of 6.9 million followers, also follows the formulaic steps of self-disclosure and curating the micro-microcelebrity. In the photo, she is showcasing her baby bump at 9 months, which is the month where typically the most growth will occur, thus resulting in discomfort and insecurities amongst mothers. This disclosure of one's baby bump in a seemingly authentic manner (they were not maternal photo shoots), creates an intimacy between the mother and her audience, and the audience and the child. This is further exemplified by multiple comments from the audience expressing their excitement on meeting the baby, and how she has been pregnant for way too long. By showcasing the pregnancy, audience members feel as though they too are on this journey with the influencer, which fortifies the levels of trust with the influencer, and creates intimate bonds with the unborn child. When intimacy and trust have been established, a significant emotional attachment has been achieved, and the inception of micro-microcelebrity becomes possible—this mommy blogger has also set up Instagram accounts for all three of her children, aged seven, four and two with the lowest following count being 694,000 followers. Where children were historically placed in factories and farms to contribute to the family's income, they are now placed in the digital realm to contribute to a parent's self-brand, and have accounts created for them as well, which reaps multiple financial benefits for the whole family. What we can deduce from this is that there is a continuous thread that links human reproduction with a

necessity to earn income, however explicit or implicit the income earning process may be.

Relatable Posts and Captions

Because full transparency and calculated authenticity are building blocks of a self-brand, one way that influencers engage with their followers via Instagram is through captions. This allows influencers to communicate with audience members and to set the tone so that the content can be better received or interpreted. This relatability is sometimes attained through Instagram reels, which are short and entertaining videos generally accompanied by some form of text and include voice overs or music in the background. These reels are used to collaborate with the community, or to engage in already existing cultural trends, like Tik Tok trends.

Krystiana (user handle krystianatiana) who has an impressive following count of 391k seldom takes pictures, but rather posts reels and engages with her followers in this fashion. These reels touch on different subjects relating to parenting, motherhood or being a wife and are often humorous and relatable in nature. One in particular (Figure 5.1) is a reel of Krystiana with her infant daughter. They are both looking around the room as though searching for people nearby and mimicking a whistle to coincide with the whistling voiceover. On its own, the reel does not make much sense, however when accompanied by the following text audience members can get a better understanding of the message being conveyed "Calling all moms who love their kids more than anything. But also admit motherhood is hard AF & they need a break. But never take one because they feel guilty and miss them." This is emblematic of Atkinson's (2014) notions regarding the ways that motherhood has historically been riddled with uncertainty and

anxiety. Here, these uncertainties are being exploited for social media engagement rates. While we can contend that social media does create a sense of community for other struggling mothers, what we must also acknowledge is that there are strategic intentions behind said posts that have less to do with camaraderie and more to do with bolstering the self-brand.

She further engages the audience by captioning the reel “where ya at, where ya at?”, which encourages users to comment whether they can relate. The sentiment is echoed by several followers, who add their anecdotes and feelings to the comment thread which creates more user engagement to the post. This relatability tactic is also used by Brooke (user handle brookeashleyhall), who boasts 842k followers and often shares her life as a mom via reels. In one reel (see figure 5.2), the mother can be seen holding a bottle of wine in one hand and rubbing a facial cream on her husband. In the reel, her two youngest sons can be seen with the facial cream and a confused expression on their faces, and the mother mouths the voiceover “she thinks that I owe her an apology—
good thing she don’t get paid for thinking.” The reel becomes more relatable with her added text that reads “telling my boys all the drama for the day because there are no girls in the house to vent to.” This reel resonates deeper with mothers who have no daughters, or “boy moms.” Several comments include the hilarious ways the boys are looking at the mother, while others comment on the fact that she needs a daughter. The influencer in question markets herself as a “boy mom,” so often, she will create reels that touch upon this in some way as her brand was built on this notion. This is similar to Hearn’s (2010) self-brander notion, that suggests that “’I’ should work hard to sell my special something to the world via the technological affordances made available to me” (p. 427). In this

instance, the special ‘something’ to sell was the fact that she not only had children, but all three were sons.

Relatability does not solely stem from one's ability to promote a particular reality that makes their family unique-it also relates to the ability of an influencer to connect with your everyday mother and alleviate any stress, guilt, or anxiety she may be experiencing, much like when mommy blogs were conceived back in the early 2000s. Andrea (userhandle supermommyof123), who has amassed 93,7k followers often simplifies general woes and realities of a stay at home mom with five young children through video reels. In one reel, she writes “When you have been stuck in the house with the kids too long…” and she lip syncs the line “I wanna be where the people are” from Disney’s The *Little Mermaid.* Mothers forging relationships with one another by virtue of the very real hardships of being a mother and the unrealistic societal expectations that comes with the title is by no means cutting edge. This was in fact how the once radical act of mommy blogging came to life, as Kido Lopez (2009) points out. However, the commercialization of motherhood coupled with the laborious and strategic realities of creating a successful self-brand introduces us to a contemporary iteration of this relationship- one that is fixated on engagement rates. While fed-up mothers would once revert to blogging to unleash raw emotions regarding the unrealistic expectations of motherhood, whether it be self-imposed or imposed via external factors, these emotions have now morphed into content material. In Figure 5.3, we can see the comments that follow, which are all expressing how relatable and/or funny this post is. In this instance, Andrea has managed to accrue authenticity points as she displays the not-so pretty

realities of being a mother, whether it be from socializing with children all day, to feeling exhausted as we can ascertain from Figure 5.4 where she captions the video:

"Mom brain? Or just overworked, overwhelmed, lack of sleep? Whatever it is I have it 🤪🤣…How about you??" Adding humorous and relatable captions provides a sense of ease to the followers as it alleviates feelings of "mom guilt," which can be summed as the desire to be a perfect parent, however this desire quickly turns into guilt when the mother is held to unrealistic expectations of what constitutes a "good" mother (Zonnefeld, 2022). At times, influencers need to be open about the hardships of motherhood to remain authentic and create trust and intimacy with their followers, as picture-perfect content does not mirror the realities of motherhood. If the saying "a picture is worth a thousand words" rings true (and social media's rising visual economy suggests this to be the case) then these hardships can only be accurately depicted through imagery. Whether it be the unglamourous realities of going to the beach as a mother (see figure 5.5), the anticipation for your child to learn how to walk upon reaching a certain age (see Figure 5.6), or even more poignant, the realities of trying to make a Tiktok video with a two-year-old boy because the audience asked for more videos with him (see Figure 5.7). What each case illustrates, either implicitly or explicitly, is the importance of including children within their posts so that their content can resonate with their audience, and to check off all the boxes to curate their self-brand. Because the self-brand is premised on being a mother, and motherhood is intrinsically tied to children, it becomes clear how and why children would be a part of the branding process and thus the labour process.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My four themes showcase how children's participation in their mothers' Instagram accounts is both necessary for mothers to establish a successful self-brand, and serves as a form of child labour, both of which are not consensual. Children's inclusion in sponsored posts provides explicit earning potential and value generation. The candid photos allow us to observe how children's participation in their posts, as well as their labour, is necessary to make a profit. The baby bump pictures are an example of how children have no consent to be included in such posts. Finally, relatable posts serve as a form of social capitalism where the audience interacts with the influencer, similar to Arvidsson's ethical surplus however said relatability is co-dependent on children. Influencer marketing has made significant headway and has set the tone for the future of marketing. Sharing intimate parts of lives on Instagram is not unusual; the platform in fact encourages this. Even earning an income from sharing content with fellow Instagram users is not an unusual activity. However, these activities pose ethical concerns when children become a necessary part of building a self-brand and monetizing content. Children posed like accessories and props in Instagram content are not protected by current labour laws despite being active participants in this form of entrepreneurial activity. My analysis showcases children’s active participation on their mother’s Instagram accounts, and how crucial these children are to building their mother’s self-brand. Until we acknowledge this and push for stricter legislation, much like groups have previously done to remove children from factories, then children will, unbeknownst to them, continue to be exploited.

In addition, children are not protected by digital laws to protect their identity or their right to privacy should they choose to have their digital footprint erased in the future. There have been instances where children become older and more aware of the permeability of their online presence and choose to take matters into their own hands by suing their parents. For example, an 18-year-old Austrian girl (Music, 2016) whose name has not been released due to Austrian privacy laws is also suing her parents for posting her childhood photos on Facebook, alleging that the posting of her pictures on Facebook- without her consent- has violated her personal rights. According to the teenager, "They knew no shame, every stage was photographed and then made public" (Music, 2016).

Those interested in pursuing future research on children's digital labour participation and exploitation may consider interviewing children who have grown up in the Instagram limelight, as well as child influencers who can articulate and understand their own experiences in the digital public eye. It would be illuminating to see whether content shooting days differed from other days, and how (and if) parents are able to assert such boundaries between childhoods and content production. This would support the notion that children are in fact actively participating in the digital labour market, while also bringing to light the immaterial labour that goes behind getting the perfect shot for their Instagram accounts or that of their mother's. It would also be interesting to conduct interviews with the mothers of these children to see whether they are aware of the ethical dilemmas tied to including their children on the platform, and to inquire if they have set up separate banking accounts that only their children can access for the work that they have put in.

It is important to reiterate that this major research paper is not an empirical large-scale study with generalized results, rather I am analyzing select accounts and pulling posts that exemplify themes located in the literature and so my sampling was selective in nature. Further research of this topic should additionally be elaborated, ranging from Instadad accounts (accounts managed by dads rather than moms) and the gendered nuance of both as content differs considerably between the two. Family accounts tend to divide themselves into their own niche groups, ranging from life hacks as a mom, kids' fashion, healthy eating for children and the documentation of the life of a child who is sick, to name a few. Conducting an in-depth analysis of all groups would be fascinating to see how authenticity is displayed in each, and the frequency of children's active participation in each.

The goal of research in this area should continue to be a push for labour laws and digital privacy laws that protect children from labour/monetary exploitation, as well as their right to privacy. Bee Fisher, the mother of three Instagram-famous boys who, after being asked about her sons' work schedule during an interview with Wired stated: "If there're days they're totally not into it, they don't have to be … Unless it's paid work. Then they have to be there. We always have lollipops on those days" (Ellis, 2019). The decision-making process of performed labour is instilled and exploited by the mother, and her children have no choice but to adhere in exchange for sugar fueled candies. Not only are they actively providing dissent about being photographed in these instances, but there is no clear indication if they are receiving the proper wages for the work they have accomplished. This work, as discussed, constitutes as a form of labour because children's activities generate profit and/or value. Discussions leading to tangible legislative change

needs to be had as children are the ones bearing the brunt of this digital shift in labour. These legislative changes need to be conducted on a federal level through government policy reforms to include digital labour within child labour laws. In addition to this, federal policy laws need to be put in place that allows for individuals to erase their digital footprint. This way, children who have yet to consent to having a digital footprint are able to have it removed at any time. Finally, there needs to be more critical awareness that concedes that children who make appearances on these accounts are in fact working children, despite their perceived innocence. After all, it is unprecedented that a being could be active contributors to the labour force even before birth, until now.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

Figure 2.3

Figure 3.1

Figure 3.2

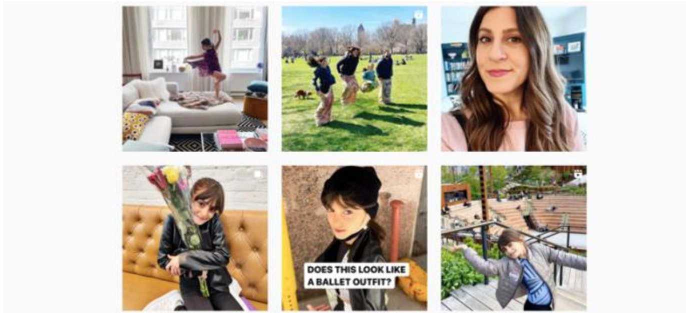

Figure 3.3

Figure 3.4

Figure 3.5

Figure 3.6

Figure 4.1

Figure 4.2

Figure 4.3

Figure 5.1

Figure 5.2

Figure 5.3

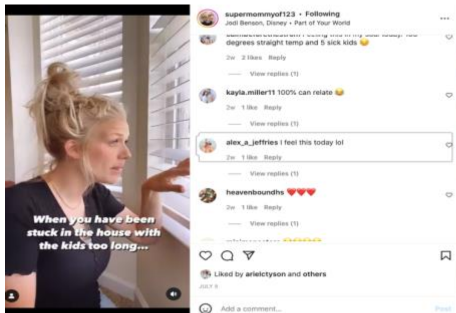

Figure 5.4

Figure 5.5

Figure 5.6

Figure 5.7

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