

Exploring Trust Between Parent Influencers and Parent Audiences on Social Media

By

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts (Communication)

In the

Department of Communication Studies

Mount Saint Vincent University

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Abstract

A trend within the current digital landscape is the rise of social media influencers—individuals who have cultivated significant followings by sharing various forms of content. Among these influencers, parenting influencers have gained notable footing, focusing on discussing topics relevant to parents in the form of parenting advice and support. Influencers achieve this through a blend of sharing and parenting, which describes how parent influencers utilize social media to disclose aspects of their daily lives and parenting experiences while educating their audience. Based on Sztompka’s (1999) framework of trustworthiness, this study explores how parenting influencers establish, maintain and convey trustworthiness on social media platforms with their audiences. Using a digital netnography approach as method and Instagram as platform, the findings of this qualitative study were grouped according to themes related to three dimensions of the framework of trustworthiness. That is, performance (education and credentials; commitment and consistency), reputation (peer -to-peer cross promotion; testimonials) and appearance (reliability and authenticity). Future research can explore trust-building strategies from both the influencer and audience perspectives and across diverse influencer types and platforms to address existing gaps and further enrich the understanding of trust in social media contexts.

Acknowledgments

To my amazing supervisor Dr. Ellen Shaffner, thank you for your insights to making this work a success. Thanks for the boost of confidence and guiding me along the way. I won't be here without your guidance, and I am most grateful to you, for the diverse perspectives you had, just interacting with you has been an eye opener for me on so many different levels.

To my family, parents, sister for providing me with a lifetime of support, I am grateful to you for being my backbone. Anderson, my husband, your constant advice and firm gentleness has been the fuel that has driven this work to completion. Thanks for providing a shoulder to lean on and taking on the parenting reigns whenever I fall short which is always.

To my beautiful boys, thanks for inspiring this work.

To my committee members, Dr Amy Thurlow and Dr. Jessie-Lee McIsaac, thank you for your insights and comments in shaping and making this work better. Dr Jessie-Lee McIsaac and the Early Childhood Collaborative Research Team, thanks for providing me with support that I never envisioned existed.

Most importantly, my work would not have been possible without the guidance and mercies of God. I am grateful for this gift of life, good health and a sound mind to complete this thesis journey.

Dedication

To Augustus B. Anderson, my husband, thank you for the opportunity to dream again.

Exploring Trust Between Parent Influencers and Parent Audiences On Social Media

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Over the past several decades, the world has gradually moved online. This digital transformation has led to a massive paradigm shift in our way of life, including in business, communication, and education processes (Dutton, 2004). The relevance of the internet and its impact on the digital world and our lives is undeniable and has become the norm in our current society; almost every activity has become digitized to some degree (Ampong et al., 2018). For example, many consumer purchases are done online, as one can order and track goods such as groceries and clothing via the Internet. Another example is the phenomenon of remote working, primarily enabled by technology which has ushered in unprecedented convenience and flexibility, allowing individuals to strike a balance between personal and work life irrespective of their location. Another notable example is the volume of information and educational resources available on the Internet which has made learning more accessible than ever before, empowering people and communities with the opportunities to upskill and broaden their horizons from the comfort of their homes. While scholars argue that online living does not replace in-person social interaction (Milenkova et al., 2023), there is no denying that the digitalization of our lives has become pervasive and normalized. As digital platforms transform almost every facet of life and industry, there have been increasing calls for research on this digital shift (De Reuver et al., 2018).

One of the ways that digitization and digital platforms have impacted our lives significantly is through social media. Social media has forever changed communication and has become an indispensable tool for connection and the transmission of information. The

introduction of social media platforms has brought about a remarkable shift from traditional communication methods to a dynamic and almost real-time communication channel (Conroy et al., 2023). With the emergence of these platforms, the speed, accessibility, and immediate feedback mechanisms of communication have been significantly enhanced. The increasing use of social media platforms has also impacted how society communicates, bridging geographical barriers and enabling people to communicate instantaneously, irrespective of distance (Dutton, 2004). Consequently, social media platforms have revolutionized how information is shared, creating compelling opportunities for individuals to interact and exchange ideas (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016).

Today's social media platforms now offer users the ability to communicate with others in a rapid and sometimes real-time dynamic, giving people more freedom to share and interact with others (Cheng et al., 2017). With a click of a button, we can follow or friend people we know in person or admire people from around the world who post content on social media intending to reach large numbers of people. A current trend on social media is the trend of influencers. Influencers are often regular people who have amassed a large following on social media, simply because of the content they post. The growth in influencers through social media has enabled ordinary people to grow in popularity online by simply sharing about themselves, their lives, their experiences, and sometimes even their families and children on social media (Archer, 2019; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Influencers often operate within specific niches, advising or educating on topics or phenomena on which they are experts (McCorquodale, 2020). This expertise can be derived from an influencer holding legitimate credentials, such as a relevant degree or license, or simply claimed by influencers who feel they have sufficient knowledge to advise others based on their lived experiences (Baker & Rojek, 2020).

Dwifatma (2015) argues that almost anyone can become an expert on the Internet. This may be due to the accessible nature of the Internet and the ability and ease with which content can be created at one's will, resulting in the surge of content creators and influencers (Dwifatma, 2015). This phenomenon of influencers is central to the idea of self-branding where "just like commercially branded products, individuals benefit from having a unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences" (Khamis, et al. 2017, p.191). This is mainly because the online space has gradually become a place where individuals actively seek out content, they are most interested in; despite audiences being saturated with so much information to choose from online, there is still an emphasis on online distinctiveness for visibility purposes. This is a necessity as influencers deliberately try to distinguish themselves in the online space to stand out among the many other influencers and content creators (Cotter, 2019). Also, the recent perk that comes with being a successful influencer is the monetization of these platforms, making social media influencing lucrative for individuals who are able to distinguish themselves (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Established influencers can make up to \$50,000 per post depending on their popularity status and follower base according to Campbell and Farrell (2020), while platforms like Twitter compensate their influencers for creating content and driving followership (Abell & Biswas, 2023). Khamis et al. (2017) argue that social media can accommodate ordinary individuals and shoot them into the light of popularity through the distinctive stories they create, furnished by "highly visible metrics of popularity and endorsement" (Khamis et al., 2017, p.196).

The current social media influencer landscape is diverse and there are countless influencers in specific and combined niches. For example, travel bloggers, brand influencers, food, fashion and lifestyle influencers, parent influencers, and sports influencers are just a few of

the long list of possibilities. These influencers continually create targeted and strategic content to meet specific audiences' needs while cultivating an authentic personal brand that commands the attention of their audiences (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Hu et al., 2019).

One such influencer trend is parenting influencers. These influencers thrive on the niche of discussing topics ranging from parenting tips to lifestyle issues in the realm of parenting. This has led to the term “sharenting”, a portmanteau of sharing and parenting, which describes parents using social media platforms to share aspects of their daily lives with others, particularly those aspects related to parenting (Jorge et al., 2021). The topics of discussion range from parenting tips and advice to personal lifestyle issues, changing and or raising the status of these individuals to parent micro-celebrities or influencers, due to their ability to reach a wide audience through the content they curate.

The phenomenon of parenting influencers has grown in recent years, as parents are increasingly relying on online platforms for social support to aid or guide them in parenting (Haslam et al., 2017). One of the reasons for this is the familiarity that comes with receiving advice from others, making the information shared by online parents deemed not just more relatable but also relevant from a tried and tested approach. Social media therefore provides ready-to-use and easily accessible content for parents with children ranging from newborns to late teenagers. The wide range of resources and information available means social media can provide vital resources to parents and validate their needs and emotions.

This has also led to the concept of sharenting, as mentioned above. Sharenting has numerous benefits, including advocating for children and providing and exchanging support and information with other parents (Cataldo et al., 2022; Jorge et al., 2021). However, some researchers argue that sharenting can lead to privacy concerns, especially when it comes to the

sharing of individual experiences and in general, putting children out in the public sphere before they are old enough to give consent (Cataldo et al., 2022; Siibak & Traks, 2019). Despite these concerns, sharenting remains a popular trend among parents who seek to connect with others, share their parenting experiences and provide information and support. Often, parents use sharenting as a means to curate memories and discuss and normalize some parenting experiences in the public domain like breast-feeding, postpartum depression, and supporting children's behaviour (Jorge et al., 2021).

The current phenomenon of information sharing is not only for connection purposes but also a form of monetization which introduces the concept of “mompreneurs” or what has come to be known as “social media influencer moms.” Researchers like Myers- Walls & Dworkin, (2015) posit that both formal (i.e., parenting groups and programs) and informal (i.e., seeking advice from family members) support have not only been around for decades but have successfully supported parents with their parenting journey. As society has become more digital due to the accessibility of the internet, platforms like social media applications have emerged as an effective means of accessing courses and information to assist parents in their parenting journey (Pretorius et al., 2019). These parenting tips, programs and information shared by parent influencers to parents are intended to aid parents in understanding children's behaviours and in becoming attuned to how they can support their children's emotional needs, which in turn enables children to develop emotional and behavioural self-regulation skills for life.

However, in building their brand, social media influencers must capitalize on trust to amass the followership needed to succeed in the online space. With the influx of parenting influencers and the abundance of sharenting, ‘trustworthiness’ is a concern. Influencers, in amassing any followership, must be able to create an intimate profile and project a space where

audiences have the confidence to trust and engage with content created by such parenting influencers. As such, I suggest that it is necessary to explore the relational trust and credibility of parenting influencers and how trust is communicated to audiences, built and maintained.

1.2 Research Issue

Parents actively search for information about child-rearing issues online “to support their parenting role and to better understand their children’s development” (Suárez et al., 2016, p. 2). The niche of online parenting support and communication is of relevance as parents, like many other groups of people in society, are turning increasingly to online sources, including social media, for advice, validation, and recommendations on how to parent their children effectively (Suárez et al., 2016). This is not a surprise; the literature suggests that over a third of the world’s population engages with different social media platforms for a variety of reasons, including information-seeking and parenting support (Chee, et al., 2023). Moran et al., (2004) define parenting support as any intervention for parents and/or caregivers aimed at reducing risks and/or promoting protective factors for their children, concerning their social, physical, and emotional well-being. For example, a social media post shared by an influencer, offering some solutions to dealing with toddler tantrums or teenage rebelliousness is a type of parenting support communication. As individuals who are comfortable with the digital world and digital natives increasingly reach child-rearing age, emerging research suggests that it has become more common for new parents to turn to social media influencers for parenting tips and support, as compared with more traditional educational resources (Schmuck, 2021). Also, social media sites provide online discourses and access to a large online social network of support (Haslam et al., 2017).

Part of the reason for the turn towards social media for information related to parental support is the ongoing digitization of the world making social media an integral part of daily life (Cataldo, et al., 2022). Additionally, social media influencers often post readily available, digestible, and relatable content, appealing to content consumers, such as parents. Researchers have investigated the context of social media, parenting and online support including parents sharing their everyday lives online, parents using the opportunities that social media provides to monetize their content, as well as why parents use diverse social media platforms (Haslam et al., 2017; Jorge et al., 2021; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021).

However, it is important to consider the concept of trust in this new communication dynamic. Cheng and colleagues (2016) assert that trust is a key indicator of human interactions, and every aspect of communication involves building a level of trust. As human interactions become increasingly mediated through digital platforms, specifically social media, and as parents continue to join (follow) online social media communities where they access the needed information to aid their parenting journey and to promote mutual support, it is necessary to assess how this relational trust is established and communicated.

1.3. Research Purpose

My research purpose is focused on this area of trust and in turn, how trustworthiness is portrayed by parenting online influencers. Specifically, I seek to examine and understand the ways trustworthiness is communicated by social media influencers who focus on providing information about parenting support across North America. I use the novel approach of netnography to study parenting support influencers and their audiences, and analyze the content, communication and engagement between influencers and audiences using Sztompka's (1999)

theoretical framework of relationship-based trust. This framework focuses on three dimensions of relationship-based trust, or trustworthiness: performance, reputation, and appearance.

This research is of personal interest to me as a mom of two toddlers and a new immigrant with my family in Canada. Social media has become my go-to reference point in trying to understand and support my children as I learn to better navigate the parenting realm outside family advice. As a millennial, I follow some social media parenting experts as I search for quick, easy, accessible and digestible content to help me navigate my parenting journey. Also, I work at a research centre, the Early Childhood Collaborative Research Centre (ECCRC), which focuses on children's well-being and co-designing solutions through collaborative initiatives with families as part of its research focus. Therefore, as an international student relying mainly on parenting influencers to assist me in my parenting journey, I am interested in how these influencers project themselves to build trust among their followers/audience.

1.4 Research Questions

In the context of the above research background, problem and purpose, this thesis addresses the following research question and accompanying sub-question:

1. How do social media parenting influencers communicate with their parent audiences?
 - a. How do social media parenting influencers draw on the dimensions of Sztompka's theory of trustworthiness (performance, reputation and appearance) in their communication with parent audiences?

I address these questions through a qualitative study that uses the method of netnography to embed myself as a passive observer in a small, curated community of social media parenting influencers on Instagram. I analyze my material using thematic analysis and Sztompka's

framework as a guide, surfacing novel insights regarding trustworthiness and communication within this niche.

1.5 Significance of Study

The potential contributions of this study are: 1) a better understanding of how aspects of trust are communicated through a social media platform (Instagram) and within a specific subject-matter community of expertise (parenting); and 2) the use of Sztompka's (1999) framework to better understand aspects of trustworthiness in a social media context. I also contribute to a growing body of work that demonstrates the potential of netnography as a method to analyze social media dynamics. In particular, netnography has not been used to study this area of parenting support on social media, so my study offers a potential template for others interested in this type of research.

1.6 Organization of Study

This study is presented in five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction which comprises a research background, research problem, research purpose, research questions, significance of the study, and the organization of the study. The second chapter reviews relevant literature on digitalization, parenting support and influencers, and trust in the social media context, and presents the theoretical framework for the study. The third chapter reviews netnography as the methodological approach employed and explains the procedure of my study. The fourth chapter offers findings and a discussion and the fifth chapter summarizes, concludes and makes recommendations for future research based on the study's limitations. The fifth chapter also reviews the research questions and discusses how they have been addressed in this research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this section, I review the necessary literature to contextualize the present study. I begin by examining digitalization and the prevalent reliance on digital technologies within contemporary society. This is followed by an overview of the terms, social media and sharenting and a thorough investigation into the complex dynamics of online trust. This culminates in an analysis of the multifaceted roles played by parenting influencers in the digital landscape, and on social media.

2.2 Understanding Digitalization

Digitalization is a “societal transformation process that uses ubiquitous digital technologies to connect ever larger social spaces” (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021, p. 9). Digitalization encompasses concepts such as digitization and datafication. Digitization involves converting analogue information to digital, while datafication entails recording and analyzing data in digital formats (Flensburg & Lomborg, 2023; Witteborn, 2022). In many parts of the world, societal engagement heavily depends on digital information and communication technologies (ICT) (Andrade & Doolin, 2016). This reliance is a consequence of the widespread presence of digitalization in contemporary society, leading to significant social implications. In other words, the proliferation of digital devices like telephones, laptops, tablets etc. enabled by the internet has greatly influenced and changed how we live and connect (Reed, 2018). Digitalization has caused a gradual transition from physical processes to virtual processes. Through the use of digital technologies, processes, and platforms users turn to the digital world for diverse reasons, such as socializing with friends, as a means of self-entertainment, or simply for acquiring knowledge and information (Büchi et al., 2019). The implication of digitalization is

evident in how it is innately woven into the everyday activities of users, hence making society heavily reliant on such technologies both for entertainment and productivity.

This heavy reliance on digitalization has encouraged the adoption of digital media platforms; an example is social media platforms, which have greatly impacted humans' way of life (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). These social media platforms have become means of organizing and shaping human activities, including economic, social and political interactions and communication (Asadullah et al., 2018). Societal activities are now enabled by the digital world in almost every aspect. Group participation, associations, advocacy, petitions and many more are all made possible and efficient through digital platforms to reach more people and amass more followers. This shows that through digitalization, platforms like social media have become a way of life and a means of life. It allows users to share knowledge, stay in constant contact with peers, seek entertainment and have access to an endless supply of information enabled by internet access (Cataldo et al., 2022; Radtke et al., 2022).

This current platform reliance has gradually become the enabler used to develop and sustain social and business relationships. It has turned users of digital platforms into content creators, by allowing them to be able to create content ranging from beauty, fashion, health and a variety of other topics. This current situation has not only enabled content creators to give their diverse opinions on a variety of topics online but also allows other users intentionally accessing such opinions to inform their decisions (Hudders et al., 2021). For example, social media content creators, such as travel bloggers, can utilize social platforms like Trip Advisor to inform their network of products and express their passion and expertise within a given field (Audrezet et al., 2020). Aside from the prevalence of digital platforms, users patronize digital platforms for a variety of reasons including the ease of availability, and ease of use of such platforms. Other

reasons include the basic need of humans to patronize anything that makes them feel at ease, content and safely enclosed in a social cycle (Chee et al., 2023) as well as connected to others in their society. Digital platforms like social media platforms and networking sites have, therefore, become an integral part of life making it difficult and, at times, unrealistic to live without them (Radtke et al., 2022).

The ubiquitousness of digital platforms and tools, such as cellphones which allow for instant access to these platforms, has also contributed to the significant change in the commercialization of communication and connection. It has increasingly become impossible for most people to spend a day without accessing their digital platforms and devices. As a result, the intricacy of social media with an individual's life is evident through a normalized routine that includes reliance on digital devices and social media platforms and the regular consumption of social media in the everyday lives of people and society (Powell & Pring, 2024). The significant change in the commercialization of communication is not only due to extensive access to the internet and digital devices, but also due to phone applications (apps) being simplified. This simplification of digital platforms has played a key role in the surge of individuals utilizing social media platforms to communicate as well as share information (Diniz & Sepúlveda, 2022).

2.3 Understanding Social Media

The term social media refers to virtual platforms that enable societal interactions and bonding opportunities without geographic constraints. It provides users with an opportunity to connect, communicate, and share ideas through electronic means enabled by the Internet (Abell & Biswas, 2023). Social media is also referred to as social networking sites, where users create, consume and exchange content within these virtual communities. Social media includes

messaging apps like WhatsApp, social networking sites like Facebook and media-sharing sites like Instagram and TikTok (Han et al., 2021). Social media platforms provide users with the opportunity to connect across continents without the restraints of time and distance as communication on these platforms is instantaneous.

Users tend to use social media for diverse reasons. It is commonly used as a source of connection, to share information, and learn (Duggan et al., 2015; Jorge et al., 2021) and also to fulfil emotional needs like seeking help, advice and connection (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Others use it to engage in politics and civic activities, exchange important health information, interact with the government, learn in both formal and informal settings and provide social and emotional support (Duggan et al., 2015). Politically, it can be used to circulate ideologies and can also be used by immigrants to maintain their intersectional identities. Groups like migrant communities, through social media, can continue to connect to their native cultures and maintain their mental health outside their home country (Chen et al., 2021). Social media has also enhanced communication activities in an affordable manner as it is a more economically friendly way of communicating with friends and family both in the same country and on foreign lands (Chen et al., 2021). It also serves as a source of health promotion tools for some users, as it provides useful health information and resources for disease knowledge and management (Han et al., 2021).

Social media is a valuable tool that provides individuals, parents, migrants, people living with disability and others, with resources tailored to specific needs and motivations (Abell & Biswas, 2023). As people continually harness the power of social media, it shows evidence that social media creates a shared network for groups and enables social integration, network support, emotional support, shared identities, and the facilitation of interpersonal relationships (Cataldo et

al., 2022; Duggan et al., 2015). Furthermore, social media can facilitate connection between people during both positive and challenging times as the network sites play host to a diverse array of human experiences (Duggan et al., 2015; Udwan et al., 2020). This is more so because social media does not only bring people together but also allows them to share their experiences and feelings with friends and strangers alike depending on their privacy settings.

In terms of the nature of support and community building, social media provides this at two levels: emotional support and informational support. The difference between these two is whereas emotional support aims to support the seeker in feeling loved and cared for, informational support tends to give the seeker advice or solutions that meet a seeker's needs (Wang et al., 2021). Furthermore, it can be said that social media enables ease of contact and group communication as compared with past forms of communication like phones and text messages. It fosters the desire to bond and provides accessibility and availability of support to users seeking specific answers to certain questions or phenomena (Han et al., 2021). Moreover, through the social connectedness that social media provides, users are also enabled to expand or improve their existing networks as well as reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness. Social connectedness becomes more accessible as users are not bounded by physical spaces or abilities. Another key point is accessing social media which can be done through diverse means but is most commonly done through social media apps on smartphones (Han et al., 2021). This has contributed to easy access to social media as most of the world's population has access to digital technologies like smartphones, tablets, computers, etc. (Radtke et al., 2022). Also, social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube are structured in a way that can use algorithmic selection to recommend new content, track content similar to users' preferences, compile personalized

feeds and recommend tailored content to users. Therefore, content that is similar to one's interest will be recommended to users based on their interests on select platforms (Hudders et al., 2021).

2.3.1 Emergence of Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

“In today's digital world, we are witnessing the explosive growth of this generation's new idols who owe their fame to social media and are better known as social media influencers” (Ruiz Gómez, 2019, p. 10). The current era of digital connectivity has enabled this new set of opinion leaders to connect with their followers to disseminate information, content, and values and influence their audience, followers, and subscribers by building a relationship with them over some time through social interactions (Zou et al., 2021). Social media influencers are content creators who are active on diverse social media platforms and who command followership and viewership based on their brand as being charismatic, likeable, engaging and knowledgeable in their field (Hudders et al., 2021; Leite & Baptista, 2022). Influencers usually build their content across different platforms and provide valuable content that attracts followers over time (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Some of the dominant platforms that enable influencers include Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

Content created by influencers is perceived as authentic and reliable (Zhou, et al., 2021). Influencers “represent a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90). According to Hudders et al. (2021), the dedicated followership and reach that SMIs have provides them the ability to directly and indirectly impact the attitudes and behaviours of their followers through the content they create. SMIs also build influence through brand acknowledgement as brands and reputable organizations approach them to endorse their products and or services. This positively impacts their perceived credibility. Also, by creating engaging and relatable content, SMIs increase in popularity and influence (Powell & Pring, 2024).

Social media influencers (SMIs) are referred to by various terms which are usually used interchangeably and instinctively. Generally, the term influencers is used for ordinary people who through the content they create have attained online recognition and popularity (Ruiz Gómez, 2019). Other terms for influencers are micro-celebrity, instafamous, and Internet famous (Jorge et al., 2021). The term influencer covers individuals who are just beginning their influencer journey and have attained popularity for only a short period, as well as individuals who have been in the influencer field for a long period (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). More established influencers are often accepted by people and brands and sometimes their popularity is to the extent of gaining some form of social capital through endorsement or the monetizing of their content (Cotter, 2019; Khamis et al., 2017). This is possible as influencers begin to make money through collaborations with advertisers and other means when they achieve a level of recognition (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019).

Social media influencers are classified under four categories according to Campbell and Farrell (2020) and are categorized by the number of followers (audience size) on their page (Ruiz Gómez, 2019). The types of SMIs range from, mega-influencers with one (1) million followers and over; macro-influencers who have attained between 100,000 to 1 million followers; micro-influencers have attained between 10,000 and 100,000 followers and nano-influencers who have just begun their career with under 10,000 followers (Park et al., 2021). The larger the audience size of an influencer, the higher the market value of the influencer. This implies that they gain more recognition and can use their social standing for profit gains such as gaining endorsement deals with brands, getting paid for the content they create, and even the number of followers and traffic that they curate to their page (Abell & Biswas, 2023; Brooks, et al., 2021; Khamis et al., 2017). Despite the clear follower difference between the types of influencers, Hudders et al.,

(2021) posit that the audience impact level of each influencer varies. This is in terms of persuasion, as the greater followers an influencer has, the less intimacy and persuasive impact it has on its followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). For example, macro-influencers are termed to be more influential than mega-influencers because of the level of engagement they can maintain with their followers. However, micro-influencers are termed more authentic because they have a more intimate audience than macro-influencers (Park et al., 2021). Research has emphasized that amongst the four influencer categories, nano influencers with their minimal follower base are noted to have the strongest engagement and persuasive rate due to their smaller audience size which promotes intimacy between influencer and audience (Hudders et al., 2021).

SIMs focus on different or specific niches and or subject matters like travel, lifestyle, food, parenting, and health, to name a few. In short, SIMs create content ranging across various topics and can be tagged as self-made celebrities who gain popularity through consistent content creation that captures the attention of viewers in a consistent manner (Ruiz Gomez, 2019). Correspondingly, social media users are also usually attracted by influential online personalities who provide information or create content on specific topics and areas of interest like healthy living, travel, food, lifestyle, beauty, fashion etc. (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Ruiz-Gomez (2019) posits that an unprecedented number of people have turned to social media to seek fame, and for the first time, fame is within reach for ordinary individuals due to social media. In consequence, ordinary people now have access to self-promotion, and the current rise of influencers ranges from “wannabes and amateurs to well-established professional self-brands,” who also vary in status (Ruiz Gómez, 2019, p. 10). Terms like micro-celebrity and social media stars conferred onto influencers, mean they are popular only to a particular niche

and people of specific interest such as parenting (Hudders et al., 2021). Influencers are also seen as “opinion leaders”, especially those that focus on specific niches, due to the influence of their social networks through information-sharing behaviour (Zhou et al., 2021). In essence, becoming famous as a SMI in present-day society does not necessarily mean possessing talent but being able to amass the right followership online (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

Due to their ability to impact consumer decisions (Han & Balabanis, 2024), a vast amount of research has been done on SMIs in diverse fields and contexts like travel (Wellman et al., 2020), fashion, bloggers (Archer, 2019; Jorge et al., 2021), audience authenticity (Cho et al., 2022), high-network influencers and influencer capital acquisition (Brooks et al., 2021). Studies have also looked at influencers impacting and influencing health outcomes (Powell & Pring, 2024; Zou, et al., 2021). Zou et al., (2021) have examined the relationship between influencers' communication strategies and their followers by assessing followers' endorsement rates. Influencers are used for public relations purposes (Cho et al., 2022) to influence public opinion and used by brands, governments and organizations as a public relations strategy to communicate messages that an organization deems important. (Hudders et al., 2021).

2.3.2 Issues of Social Media Influencers

Scholars argue that influencers' relationships with their followers are far from reciprocal. They use the term pseudo friendship as the relationship between the influencer and their followers cannot be described as authentic like that of two friends (Yuan & Lou, 2020). There is also the issue of parasocial relations, where audiences' relationships with influencers are termed as only an illusion and are not real (Yuan & Lou, 2020). This brings about the question of the authenticity and credibility of the information shared and the intentionality of the influencer. The question remains to what extent is the relationship being forged an authentic one? Is it to build a

real relationship or to make a gain? This could be in terms of achieving popularity, acquiring a micro-celebrity role or gaining an advantage of the relationship to build a means of monetization. Ruiz Gomez (2019), in classifying social media influencers according to the criteria of mega, micro and nano influencers, argues that these influencers have amassed a number of followers in their own right by creating authentic, engaging content. However, there is the issue of accidental influencers, that is the wannabees, who came into the spotlight inadvertently to experience a short fame. The wannabes are amateur digital creators and not yet in the limelight. They lack skills and try to ride on successful influencers' exposure by copying most of their content as well as tagging them to try to gain attention to their page, or the attention of some of their followers (Bainotti, 2023; Ruiz Gómez, 2019). They also have no authentic self but rather imitate viral content with the hopes of being popular. The question then remains on the authenticity of the influencers especially as there is the need to continue to fuel their popularity with engaging content to remain influential in the social media domain (Kharmis et.al, 2017) for personal gains.

2.4 Parenting and Social Media Use

Parenting has experienced a significant transformation in the era of digital technology, as digital platforms like social media have become an integral aspect of a parent's life in their parental journey (Cataldo et al., 2022). The research focused on parental social media use (SMU) predominantly centres on two main motivations: the quest for information and the reception of social support (Olpin et al., 2023). The information-seeking dimension of parental SMU is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon that plays a crucial role in shaping contemporary parenting practices. Parents increasingly resort to social media platforms as accessible and diverse outlets for information about child development, health, lifestyle and other facets of their parenting journey (Olpin et al., 2023). Recognizing the motivations and consequences of information-

seeking behaviour in this context is vital for understanding the broader landscape of parenting in the digital age.

Accessibility and convenience are some of the key factors that drive parents to use social media for information-seeking purposes (Jorge et al., 2021). Social media platforms provide a wide array of groups, forums, and pages dedicated to parenting topics, covering areas such as infancy, child nutrition, behavioural challenges, and educational strategies. Additionally, parents benefit from real-time information and updates on parenting trends, emerging research, and child-related news, fostering a sense of immediacy and relevance. Moreover, parents turn to social media to gain diverse perspectives and experiences in parenting. Studies underscore that engaging in SMU can offer social capital and assistance. This is evident with the current rise of mummy entrepreneurs who have been coined ‘mumpreneurs’ (Jorge et al., 2021).

The use of social media for information-seeking also holds implications for individuals' health outcomes, prompting investigations into parental SMU concerning the search for health-related information (Han et al., 2021). Furthermore, general SMU among parents has been linked to various personal consequences, including heightened levels of worry and stress related to parenting responsibilities, feelings of despair arising from social comparisons, and suboptimal work performance (Chee et al., 2023; Han et al., 2021; Olpin et al., 2023). Parental social media use for information-seeking is a multifaceted and evolving aspect of contemporary parenting. Understanding these dynamics is essential for understanding the complexities of parenting in the digital era and informing strategies that parents seek to promote positive outcomes for themselves and their families while navigating parenting.

2.4.1 Sharenting, Parenting Support, and Influencers

The term parenting influencers, seeking information online to assist with parenting begins from sharenting, a term that combines the word sharing and parenting. “Sharenting involves social media exposure, quality of the parent-child relationship, ethical and privacy concerns, psychological motivations underlying parental online behaviour, and attitudes toward social media” (Cataldo et al., 2022, p. 8). This term “sharenting” is a rising trend online where parents share information or details of their children’s activities on social media platforms and with social media becoming an integral part of societal daily life, this term has become even more popular (Archer, 2019; Cataldo et al., 2022; Jorge et al., 2021). The precedence of digital technology in this current digital-first society has influenced how parents choose to raise their children (Archer, 2019; Fox et al., 2023). Sharenting is more than exposing information about a child’s life through the experiences of the parent and their frequent interactions with their child. The context of the type of posts that parents upload online of their children ranges from videos to pictures of children’s daily and/or random activities, including how they care for their child as well as dietary needs. This phenomenon is even more popularized as present-day parents are encouraged to share images and stories of their parenting journey online (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). This form of sharing or updating the online community of parenting activities mostly includes the sharing of details about children online. According to researchers, some underlying reasons for sharenting is the need to update and communicate as parents aim to include their close friends and families in the raising of their children, while also collecting precious memories (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Duggan et al., 2015).

Sharenting is boosted by the existence of social media encouraging parents to share the raw challenges of parenting online or among their online social cycles to gain a form of social

support or contribute to building a community of mutual support (Cataldo et al., 2022).

Researchers indicate that sharenting and social media are sure ways to attain quick help; hence, the convenience of using the internet to overcome immediate challenges is one of the key motivations for engaging in the act of sharenting (Cataldo et al., 2022).

Scholars argue that sharenting begins way before a child is born beginning with the documentation of the first ultrasound, leaving digital footprints created by parents for their children before they are even born (Siibak & Traks, 2019). Like most online phenomena, researchers continue to highlight the issues with sharenting. This includes the debate of children's privacy, and this is especially questionable in scenarios where parent influencers profit from the content they produce and share on social media platforms (Cataldo et al., 2022; Duggan et al., 2015). Research indicates that most children are reported to feel embarrassed by the type of content parents share about them online (Jorge et al., 2021). Considering this, there are arguments that parents, as stewards of their children's identity and representation, should not share information that reflects negatively on their children's personalities. Another reason why researchers continue to contest sharenting is the phenomenon of digital kidnapping (Whigham, 2015) where pictures of children can be downloaded and re-posted by total strangers parading them as their own. There are also discussions on how parents should ask for permission before leaving digital footprints of their children online in the name of creating a support group, offering advice, or seeking help (Duggan et al., 2015; Jorge et al., 2021; Siibak & Traks, 2019). However, this is hardly the case as parents usually post about their children without their consent (Minkus et al., 2015; Moser et al., 2017).

With the major dilemma that sharenting presents, research shows two angles of findings which can solve some of the issues raised in sharenting content. The first is some parents do not

consider the harm in disclosing pertinent details about their children while other parents are aware of the issues of oversharing and are worried about protecting their children's privacy and are confronted with this ethical dilemma. Some parents therefore try to solve this issue by disclosing only what they think is appropriate to share about their children online, acting as stewards of their children's image before their children grow into autonomous adults who can then choose how they would like to present themselves to an online community or platforms (Siibak & Traks, 2019). Parents also use anti-sharenting strategies like blurring children's faces, close-up photos of only the kids without others, as well as covering the faces of kids with emoticons (Archer & Kao, 2018).

The digital environment has become one of the main information portals that provide parents with actual assistance in their parenting journey. Parents are users of social media platforms but also look up to some parent influencers in search of support. These social media parent influencers provide content specific to understanding children and raising them appropriately to meet the needs of parents who browse social media sites in need of parenting advice and support. The appeal of such parent influencers is their position to be more relatable as they are projected as individuals who produce near-to-real-time content but also have specific niches and create a powerful presence in the everyday lives of their followers, affecting their thoughts, emotions and behaviours both at the conscious and subconscious levels (McCorquodale, 2020). Parent influencers provide a network of peers among whom discussions, information sharing and seeking take place and are beneficial to individuals of similar interests, such as parents who are struggling with the trials of parenting. However, many parent influencers may not have the credentials or experience to share such information, despite the fact that they are looked to as parenting influencers. Additionally, if they possess credentials, the added nuance

of monetization through social media popularity could impact their willingness to provide content that isn't considered trendy or exciting. As parents look increasingly for parental support from influencers, the issues of who to trust, what information to believe, and why becomes important.

2.5 Online Trust

With the gradual shift of technological advancement, online trust is now an integral part of social discourse. Obadă & Dabija, (2022) posits that digital platforms like social media, which promote interactivity and content co-creation, provide a platform to develop and maintain long-lasting online relationships with different stakeholders and foster two-way communication between groups of people, organizations, individuals and their external publics. Therefore, there is the continuous reliance on online platforms by people to obtain relevant information, and topics of interest and utilize the platforms also to share their experiences. Social media use has become a relatively crucial trust-building tool in communication as it provides unparalleled opportunities to directly liaise with stakeholders (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Rath et al., 2018). Social media arguably offers an unequivocal opportunity to create, share content and build relations (Lai & Fu, 2021). Social media platforms, through their interactivity function, can contribute to building a trustworthy relationship. Characteristics that make this trust-building relationship authentic include two-way interaction and consistent engagement with followers. This is especially important in the domain of social media online conversations as building trust online is not as simple as projecting the same relationship to an offline version.

The subject of trust cannot be overlooked as social media has become a main source of sharing and accessing information by diverse groups online. Both ordinary people and professionals have the same space and access to share and provide information to anyone who

will grant them an audience on social media. This is an important factor in the influencer domain as influencers have the power to shape audiences' attitudes through the content they produce and their followership (Abell & Biswas, 2023), which contributes to the unique relationships in building online trust (Liu et al., 2015). This issue of trust is challenging in online settings as relationship building online does not present itself the same way as face-to-face communication especially with the possibility of information misrepresentation by the receiver (Liu et al., 2015). Although most of the online information-sharing exists within people with close relations or ties, social media through the accessibility to online platforms has brought about close conversations among groups of people that are not so close, but only interact via online platforms mostly because they share similar interests. Considering this, trust is built through continuous interaction and “the confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23 as cited in Kim & Kim, 2021, p. 225).

2.5.1 Trust Strategies Adopted by Social Media Influencers (SMI)

Managing and maintaining trust is essential in the influencer world as trust fuels the maintenance of all forms of exchange in relationship building (Lee et al., 2022a). SMIs are viewed by their followers as a source of expertise and trustworthiness. It is, therefore, vital to understand the strategies that influencers use to maintain trust. Hudders et al. (2021) posit that the difference between a traditional A-list influencer and a social media influencer is the closeness or the relationship that the influencer has with followers. The intimacy built between influencers and followers is what distinguishes them from celebrities, as followers view the influencers as peers instead of as distant celebrities. Influencers can interact more with their peers, they can keep in touch with their followers and also share aspects of their personal life also termed as ‘celebrification’ (Brooks et al., 2021; Hudders et al., 2021). Social media

influencers, because of their position of being seen as trustworthy by other social media users, are usually able to forge a relationship with their audiences due to the authentic experience they provide to their followers.

To reach an influencer status and to amass the large followership that influencers have, existing literature suggests that three characteristics are relevant in contributing to the impact that SMIs have on their followers and in generating a higher number of followers to attain an influencer's status. Some of these three crucial characteristics to achieve an influencer status are expertise, authenticity and intimacy (Han & Balabanis, 2024). In developing trust and building an authentic brand, other key things that come into play are the source credibility of the content an influencer is sharing which involves trustworthiness (based on honesty and sincerity), source expertise (focused on competence and capability), similarity (mutual characteristics, relatability, which contributes to an influencers likeability) and attractiveness (this can be the persona, either physical or social) (Yuan & Lou, 2020). It is worth noting that influencers are deemed trustworthy only when internet users perceive them as authentically producing content and valuable content they require (Hudders et al., 2021). Authenticity is always linked to expertise as influencers often build expertise in a particular domain by focusing their profile on one niche or product category (e.g., food, fashion, luxury or fitness) (Brooks et al., 2021; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Hudders et al., 2021)

To make the desired impact and to achieve the needed connection to stand out among others, some strategies influencers adopt include using content that is emotion-driven (Powell & Pring, 2024), and utilising essential microblogging features like the use of hashtags, pictures and videos (Zou et al., 2021). Of course, due to the excessive content out there, one of the issues an influencer faces is the ability to capture their audience. This is a result of being in an

information-saturated world where users on social media glance at large amounts of content daily, without necessarily fixing their attention on content. For instance, Instagram is one such platform that is “designed to promote and facilitate only a glance of content, making attention even harder to achieve” (Ruiz Gomez, 2019, p. 20). As a result, social media influencers must grab the attention of their followers.

Both established and potential social media influencers come to develop an authentic brand to be able to capture the needed attention to gain and sustain the name of social media influencers. To do this, some of the strategies that they utilize are defining their target audience and creating content tailored towards a particular niche, to rise above the noise and gain a competitive advantage in the already competitive environment. Attracting attention is based on the narrative of the SMI, this could include having the right personality, being able to capture attention with great storytelling skills, and being reliable. Another is being authentic by providing compelling and distinctive content, in other words, providing content relevant to the interests of specific groups of people. This strategy is intended to gather a community of followers as well as create meaningful engagement (Khamis et al., 2017; Ruiz Gómez, 2019). Trust in essence is believing that an individual is not only reliable but there is the confidence that the individual can perform to expectation without fail and there is no risk involved in putting utter confidence in the individual (Lee et al., 2022b). Social media influencers have come to embody that epitome of trust as they build the bridge between regular everyday social media users and influencers who have amassed a large following and are seen as experts in specific fields (Liu et al., 2015).

2.6 Models and Theories Used in the Study of Trust of Influencer Research

This sub-section examines some theories and models used to study trust in the influencer space. Chiefly amongst these models and theories are Source Credibility Theory (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Yuan & Lou, 2020), Parasocial Interaction Theory (Aw & Chuah, 2021; H. Kim, 2022; Leite & Baptista, 2022), Trust Transfer Model (Hu et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021). I end this section with a discussion of the framework guiding this study, Sztompka's framework of trustworthiness.

2.6.1 Source Credibility Theory

The study of trust in influencer research has gained significant attention within the communication discipline. One key theoretical framework employed in this context is Source Credibility Theory, first proposed by Hovland, Janis, and Kelly in 1953. This theory suggests that individuals are more likely to be persuaded when the information comes from a source perceived as credible (Han & Balabanis, 2024). In the realm of influencer research, this implies that the perceived credibility of an influencer directly influences the trustworthiness attributed to the information they share. The Source Credibility Theory highlights the crucial role of an influencer's credibility in shaping the level of trust between the influencer and their audience (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Consequently, researchers explore how influencers establish and maintain their credibility, recognizing its direct connection to the development and sustenance of trust in the influencer-follower relationship. Source credibility, a pivotal aspect in the field of communication, is recognized to be a multidimensional construct, incorporating diverse facets that collectively contribute to the perceived reliability and persuasiveness of a source. Two foundational dimensions identified by Hovland et al. (1953) are expertise and trustworthiness, highlighting the importance of possessing knowledge and being deemed reliable in shaping

source credibility. Additionally, McGuire (1985) introduced attractiveness as another dimension, acknowledging the impact of personal appeal on the perceived credibility of a source (McGuire, 1985.). Ohanian (1990) further expounds on the concept of source credibility by categorizing it as a three-dimensional construct. That is, the trinity of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness collectively defines the intricate dynamics of source credibility (Ohanian, 1990). Trustworthiness underscores the reliability and integrity of the source, while expertise emphasizes the possession of knowledge and competence. Simultaneously, attractiveness encapsulates the appeal and likability of the source, recognizing the role of personal charm in influencing credibility judgments. Expanding on this conceptualization, Lou & Yuan, (2019) contribute to the discourse on source credibility by proposing an enriched view that encompasses four dimensions. In addition to trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, they introduce the dimension of similarity. The inclusion of similarity acknowledges the significance of perceived resemblance or shared characteristics between the source and the audience, recognizing it as an influential factor in shaping credibility perceptions.

2.6.2 Parasocial Interaction Theory

The Parasocial Interaction Theory, initially formulated by Horton and Wohl in 1956, is another useful framework for examining trust within the landscape of influencer research. This theory scrutinizes the formation of one-sided relationships between media consumers and media personalities, a highly relevant phenomenon in the context of influencer-follower dynamics (Brestovanský & Sekerešová, 2022). Parasocial interaction is usually characterized by a feeling of closeness as a result of ‘reciprocal interaction’ (Leite & Baptista, 2022). Despite the absence of genuine interpersonal connections, followers often develop a profound sense of connection and trust with influencers. Within this theoretical paradigm, researchers delve into the strategies

employed by influencers to intentionally cultivate and manage parasocial relationships, recognizing them as integral components of trust-building mechanisms. Recent research in this area has focused on the multifaceted nature of influencer-follower dynamics, acknowledging that trust is intricately intertwined with the gratifications followers seek through their engagement with influencers (Matenga, 2019).

2.6.3 Trust Transfer Model

The Trust Transfer Model, an extension of trust literature, posits that trust in one domain can influence trust in another (Hu et al., 2019). In influencer research, this directs attention to how influencers strategically build trust in specific domains, such as product recommendations, and subsequently leverage that trust to permeate other areas, shaping the multifaceted nature of trust in the influencer-follower relationship.

Ultimately, these are just a few of the many models and frameworks that have been used to try and understand the complicated construct of trust, and how that construct is operationalized in digital spaces like social media. One framework of trust that has not been used in social media research thus far is Sztompka's framework of trustworthiness, which focuses on reputation, performance and appearance. In the next section, I describe this framework and its potential for my study.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

In this part of the review, I explain the main framework that supports my study, which is Sztompka's (1999) conceptual framework of trustworthiness. This framework serves as the theoretical structure that guides my study, helping me to examine and understand how trustworthiness is portrayed by parenting online influencers.

2.7.1 Framework of Trustworthiness

Sztompka's (1999) framework of trustworthiness focuses on trust building from a relational approach (Kacperska et al., 2022). Sztompka posits that various cues, and situations enable people to confer their trust on another person, process, or institution. He argues that the three cues in estimating or determining trustworthiness are reputation, performance and appearance. These determinants of trust were initially explained from a business and political perspective. However, I propose to apply this framework of trustworthiness to social media studies, from a communication perspective and assess trustworthiness as relating to parenting influencers and how they build trust and influence on social media.

2.7.2 Reputation: A Good Name

Reputation like a good name, is hard to earn but also extremely easy to lose. Reputation according to Sztompka (1999) "is an investment, a resource which allows us to elicit from others some valuable assets, among them, their trust and all that goes with it" (p.75). Sztompka defines reputation as "simply the record of past deeds" (p. 71). This regards how long an individual, business or institution has been in existence to be able to trace past conducts and successes, to adequately assess an entity's reputation. Reputational considerations also emphasize "consistency of the past record" (p.72) to estimate or project future reputation. Sztompka advances that estimating reputation to confer trust is done through personal observations, relying on various "second-hand testimonies" (p.72) including CVs, publication lists, biographies, continuous lines of achievements, titles and certificates and so on. In terms of reputational trust there is the tendency of trust to be contagious because of trust extended by the public and "significant other" (p.73). Significant others are relevant individuals who are also perceived as trustworthy by the truster. It is worth noting that every society is different hence the context of their trust will differ across societies with individuals looking out for specific reputational

tendencies before they confer trust. Currently, and in the social media landscape, audiences pay more attention to visibility and mass following which is also a way of considering trust in the social media landscape. However, Sztompka (1999) asserts that reputational information that people rely on to build trust can be falsified to mislead others to form trust. For example, falsification of credentials in the business realm, buying of votes in the political realm and buying followers and likes in the social media landscape.

In essence, the concept of reputation can be said to be based on the concepts of maintaining a good name, attracting the trust of people one depends on to also increase one's worth and profits since the benefits derived from a good reputation are an increase in one's personal worth, services and goods according to Sztompka (1999).

2.7.3 Performance: Present Action

Unlike reputation, performance accesses the current conduct to confer trust. "Performance means actual deeds, present conduct, currently obtained results" (Sztompka, 1999, p.75). Although using performance as a clue is not as reliable as reputation which checks past deeds, performance is another reliable clue to confer trust. This is essential as people continually look at the output to base their trust in a trustee. Considering that not all scenarios can base trust on past deeds, like in sports and academic examinations, there are a few examples where past conduct does not necessarily play a role in conferring trust or vice versa. A major flaw with the performance cue as a benchmark to confer trust pointed out by Sztompka (1999) is people's ability to put on the best behaviour while under observation. An example is the probation period of a new job. "People may put up a show of exemplary performance, efficiency, generosity, caring, caring, even heroism, which has nothing to do with their conduct but is intended to impress another and win trust" (p.78). Although there are a variety of metrics used to measure

performance, evaluation of performance can also be subjected to the evaluator's bias and sometimes manipulations. In borrowing this concept to the social media landscape, performance metrics include things like quality of content, follower size and growth over time, number of likes, comments, and/or views, and even things like the number of collaborations or paid content are used to judge performance. We decide how trustworthy someone is based on our assessment of their performance against these types of metrics in the social and social media context.

2.7.4 Appearance

Appearance and demeanor are the third factors involved in deciding trustworthiness. The relationship of appearance to trustworthiness is most significant across three dimensions: dress, bodily discipline, and civility (Giddens, 1991 as cited in Sztompka's 1999). It can be said that it is the external cue that enhances trust as we consider individuals to be trustworthy if they are well-dressed, exhibit neatness, healthfulness, and order; and, if they are civil – good-mannered and appropriately restrained in their everyday behaviour. These external cues, although much more deceptive than reputation and performance are still relevant to trust according to Sztompka's (1999) framework of trustworthiness. Also, people continually trust individuals who are like them in terms of appearance and stature. For example, in the context of this study, parents will trust parenting advice from a parent influencer who has lived the experience and suggestions being brought forward to the online public domain. Sztompka's (1999) suggestion that we make our contextual trustworthiness estimations of others based on our ability to judge these three main elements: reputation, performance, and appearance will be the guide as I explore trust among parent and parenting influencers on social media.

2.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, my review of relevant scholarly works has provided a foundation for understanding the context of my present study. I delved into the impact of digitalization and the widespread use of digital technologies in today's society. I then review the concept of social media influencers, sharenting, and the turn to social media for parenting support. I analyze the dynamics of online trust and present Sztompka's (1999) framework as a theoretical approach to my study. In the next chapter, I turn to the study itself. I discuss my methodological approach of netnography, describe the setting I embed myself in as a passive observer, and explain my method of collecting material, recording field notes, and analysis during this netnographic process.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I offer an extensive review of the necessary and comprehensive literature on influencers, parenting, social media, and the theoretical foundations pertinent to this study. In this chapter, I discuss the methodological approach to my research. First, I discuss my position as a researcher, focusing on the philosophical assumptions underlying my work. I then discuss my method of netnography and explore why it is useful as a means to study influencers on Instagram and the ways they communicate. I discuss my choice of Instagram as the platform for my research in more detail, review how I selected who to observe, and describe my netnographic data collection process. I then discuss my approach for analyzing my findings.

3.2 Researcher Positionality

Research is founded on philosophical assumptions related to the researcher's view or perception of reality (Turyasingura, 2011). This is collectively referred to as one's paradigm, defined by Kuhn (1970) as, a "set of beliefs, values and techniques which is shared by members of a scientific community, and which acts as a guide or map, dictating the kinds of problems scientists should address and the types of explanations that are acceptable to them." (p.22). Researchers suggest that one's paradigm is the various philosophical assumptions associated with a point of view in a research work (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The three fundamental elements which characterizes the underlying distinctions of philosophical assumptions constituting paradigms are ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Cresswell, 2009). The most referred to or dominant paradigms that reflect the major theoretical directions are the positivistic, the interpretive and the critical paradigms (Mingers, 2004; Myers & Avison, 2002). The three major paradigms have their respective views of issues and dictate how social phenomena can be studied

but “in the practice of social research, their distinctions are not always clear cut” (Myers & Avison, 2002).

For the purpose of my study, and in alignment with my personal world view and beliefs, I employ an interpretivist approach in this study. Interpretivism suggests that “access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments” (Myers, 2008, p. 39). The interpretivist position is based out of a critique of positivism in social sciences. That is, interpretivism ontological position that meaning exists independent of human consciousness of it (Collins, 2018). According to the interpretivist position, it is important for the researcher as a social actor to appreciate differences between people (Saunders et al., 2019) and to recognize their own position and influence on the research. Moreover, research from an interpretivist approach usually focuses on meaning and may employ multiple methods to reflect different aspects of the issue. Ontological assumptions pertain to the nature and form of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In the context of my research, the focus is on exploring trustworthiness and communication on a digital platform, specifically examining how parent influencers on Instagram communicate themes related to Sztompka’s dimensions of trustworthiness. This ontological perspective acknowledges the constructed nature of reality. This means that, from my perspective as a researcher, my understanding of communication, of trust, of Instagram, and other aspects involved in the research is not of fixed, external reality but one that emerges through social interactions and shared experiences among users. Thus, this research paradigm informs my position as a researcher that the phenomena are continually shaped and reshaped by the collective actions and perceptions of individuals within this digital environment.

Epistemology concerns the nature and scope of knowledge, determining what is regarded as valid knowledge (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). It involves the degree of proximity between the researcher and their subjects. In my research, I employ an indirect observational method, observing posts by research participants on their social media pages. This methodological choice reflects an interpretivist epistemological stance, where knowledge is acquired inductively. An inductive approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study, allowing patterns and meanings to emerge organically from the data. The interpretivist paradigm, as posited by Angen (2000), asserts that researchers' values are intrinsic to all stages of the research process, acknowledging the inseparability of subject and object. This perspective is particularly pertinent to my position as an immigrant mother who has experienced separation from my extended family and have had to raise my children with my husband alone in a new country. My main source of support in raising my children and navigating the parenting realm has been through learning from parenting influencers on social media. Hence, my personal experiences and philosophy inevitably influence my research.

3.3 Netnography - A Qualitative Approach

In this study, I employ a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is an appropriate method for this study for several reasons. First, it aligns with my interpretivist approach as a researcher. Second, it allows for in-depth and detailed consideration of phenomena that cannot be controlled (in this case, dynamics on social media) and allows for multiple meanings and understandings to emerge from this consideration of the material under study. Although what I notice and surface from the research may be different from what another researcher would

notice, due to my personal position as a mother and immigrant, for example, the focus in qualitative research is on the plausibility of meaning crafted through the research process.

The specific method I employ in this study is netnography (Kozinets, 2019). Netnography is a qualitative, interpretive methodology that is well-suited to digital research; it is also called digital ethnography. This qualitative approach allows the researcher to embed themselves into online communities and conversations through digital observation. This form of research method adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through electronic networks (Costello, et al., 2017). Just like ethnography, netnography requires the researcher to be deeply immersed in a social setting over time to understand a people's context and way of life. Netnography is defined as a reflexive and non-intrusive approach to analyzing communication and behaviour on digital platforms and it is well-suited to the study of my thesis, as it is appropriate for studying cybercultures (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019). This is because netnography affords researchers “anonymity, cocreation, rich communication, emergent data and support groups” (Costello et al., 2017, p. 4). Although netnography has traditionally been used in consumer behaviour research, it has been employed in other qualitative research, including research exploring communication and interactions on social media (Janta et al., 2014; Tenderich et al., 2019). To date, it has not been used to study parenting influencers on Instagram. I use a non-participatory, or passive observer style of netnography for this study, meaning that I simply observe without engaging. As the individuals being observed all had public social media profiles and large followings, and because of the fact that intrusion wasn't necessary to observe the community, ethics approval for this study was not required.

3.3.2 Instagram as Platform

As discussed in the previous chapter, social media platforms include a diverse array of digital environments, each with distinct features and user demographics (Weller, 2016). These platforms can be categorized into several types, including social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), microblogging platforms (e.g., Twitter), media-sharing sites (e.g., Instagram and YouTube), professional networking platforms (e.g., LinkedIn), and content communities (e.g., Reddit) (Duong, 2020). Each type facilitates different forms of interaction and content dissemination, influencing how users engage with information and with each other. This understanding influenced my choice of social media platform. For my study, I focused on Instagram as it has become a prominent media-sharing platform. It is also well-suited for studying parenting influencers for several reasons. First, Instagram's primary focus on visual content allows influencers to create compelling and relatable narratives through images and videos, which are more engaging and emotionally resonant compared to text-based content (Atiq et al., 2022; Leaver et al., 2020). This visual emphasis allows parent influencers to engage with their followers by sharing photo and video aspects of their personal lives, parenting practices, and daily routines. Second, Instagram's extensive use of features like stories and reels provides influencers with multiple avenues to interact with their audience in real-time and over extended periods. These features enable dynamic and continuous engagement, fostering a sense of community and sustained interaction, which are critical for developing trust. Additionally, Instagram's algorithm prioritizes content based on engagement metrics, meaning that posts by influencers who effectively engage their audience are more likely to be seen by a wider audience. This algorithm visibility amplifies the reach and impact of parental influencers and means that users seeking parental support would often be algorithmically guided towards popular parenting

influencers. Finally, Instagram's demographic composition, which includes a significant proportion of users who are young parents, aligns well with the target audience for research on parental influencers (Egmoose et al., 2022). The platform's user base is characterized by active engagement and a high degree of receptivity to influencer content, making it an ideal context for examining the dynamics of trust. In conclusion, Instagram's visual-centric approach, diverse interaction features, algorithmic amplification, and demographic alignment make it an optimal platform for studying the trust of parental influencers.

3.4 Population and Sampling

The population in a research study refers to the group(s) or variable(s) under investigation. In this study, the population under investigation is parent influencers, specifically parent influencers on Instagram. I used the framework from Campbell and Farrell (2020) which categorizes influencers according to follower size to focus my study on mega-influencers (more than one million followers) and macro-influencers (between 100,000 and one million followers). I made this choice in order to ensure that I was observing an active community which I expected to have high levels of engagement from users, as well as regular, consistent posting from the influencers. Focusing on larger accounts also ensured that the parenting influencers were popular and had achieved some kind of recognition in the parenting influencer domain. Although it would have been interesting to include smaller accounts in this study, I felt it was important to only observe accounts that are very public and well-known for this initial exploratory investigation.

I purposively selected six influencers to “follow” as part of my netnography. The first criteria for selection was that they had to be parent influencers, meaning they post content related to parenting, such as parenting advice or parenting support. The second criteria for selection was

account size, as discussed above. I also selected influencers who claimed to be parenting experts. This included influencers with professional backgrounds such as clinical psychologists, those who listed a certification of some kind in their biography on Instagram and those who presented themselves as parenting coaches or experts in describing themselves. I prioritized selecting parent influencers with content focused on the social and emotional health of children. This means that influencers posting on content specific to nutrition, for example, were excluded. In order to generate this list of influencers, I used my knowledge of popular parenting influencers from my professional background, as well as my personal knowledge of parenting influencers who I have followed or seen on my own social media. I also searched for the most popular parenting influencers online and added them to my list based on the above criteria.

I ultimately ended up with a list of thirty influencers. To narrow this list down to manageable size for my data collection phase, I chose influencers who posted most regularly to posts and stories, and posted showing their face, not just using text-based content. I also ensured that each of my selected influencers were verified by Instagram. I viewed this verification as a sign of credibility insofar as the account has acknowledged as legitimate by the platform.

In the next section, I describe each of the six influencers in brief. I use their real handles, due to the size and popularity of their accounts, and due to the fact that this research was observational only.

3.4.3 Influencer Profiles:

1. Influencer A: dr.siggie

- Dr.siggie is a parenting expert with a PhD and a mother of three male adult children. She shares content on practical tools to assist parents with children of all ages, through the teenage years. The range of courses she has developed and

teaches include ‘everything sibling’ which is her newest course (June 2024), as well as courses on anxiety, sharing, copying skills, and sharing. Her follower size as of June 2024 is 1.6 million followers. She uses her Instagram platform to highlight key topics related to her paid parenting content.

2. Influencer B: doctorshefali

- Doctorshefali is a child psychologist and a New York Times best-selling author. She is a mom of one. She hosts a podcast that was launched on Mother’s Day (May) 2024 that stayed number 1 in the chart of many countries including USA, Canada, Singapore, Australia and India. She is also the CEO of Conscious Parenting Institute where she mentors others in the area of conscious parenting. As of June, 2024, her Instagram platform has a follower size of 1.2 million followers.

3. Influencer C: drbeckyatgoodinside

- Drbeckyatgoodinside is a clinical psychologist specialising in parenting, resilience, anxiety and relationships. She is a parent to three young children and runs a membership only community called Good Inside. She hosts a podcast by the same name. On her Instagram platform, she focuses on sharing actionable strategies for parents. The topics she discusses and educates upon include managing and understanding ‘deep feeling kids’, potty training and resilience. As of June, 2024, her follower size is 2.7 million.

4. Influencer D: Transformingtoddlerhood

- Transformingtoddlerhood is a certified coach and a toddler expert who shares information or educational pieces on topics such as managing yelling and

tantrums, fostering sibling relationships, creating calm environments, and general toddler tips. She is a mother to a three-year-old. As of June, 2024, her follower size is 840,000.

5. Influencer E: consciousmommy

- Consciousmommy is a psychotherapist as well as a licensed marriage and family therapist. She specializes in parenting consciously and child development, as well as helping adults break cycles of shame and abuse as parents. She hosts an online community called the Conscious Mommy movement and delivers numerous (paid) workshops through this community. As of June, 2024, she has 225,000 followers.

6. Influencer F: Raising_yourself

- Raising_yourself is a certified parent coach. Her content focuses on being connected as a parent and encourages parents to be aware of their own upbringing as they raise their children. She often shares information about connecting with children and the need for parents to reparent themselves in order to parent their kids successfully. As of June 2024, she has 436,000 followers.

All influencers are female, white-appearing, and mothers. They are all based in North America.

3.5 Netnography in Action

After selecting my influencers, I prepared to begin my netnography. I created a brand - new Instagram account and followed just the six selected influencers so that I could immerse myself in their digital content. I also prepared a spreadsheet to record my fieldnotes. Each day, I would record in an excel sheet created to serve as my digital journal whether or not each influencer had posted on their Instagram feed, the type of post, and the general content of the

post. I also recorded whether they posted on stories and took notes of the general content of their stories. Additionally, I made space in my excel document to record my thoughts and reflections regarding their content. I also noted whether or not the influencers were engaging with comments on their posts, and for each post, whether the comments were generally positive or negative. I also created space to record my reflections on how influencers engaged with their audiences generally, as well as a general space to record my overall observations. For this section, I used the prompts of performance, reputation and appearance from Sztompka's model to help ensure my thinking returned to these concepts regularly.

I then began my netnographic journey in earnest. For one month, I spent approximately one hour each day immersing myself in the digital world of my six parenting influencers. I did not set a specific time for observation, but I always logged on to the Instagram platform early in the morning and before bedtime in order to adequately catch and record daily updates in my excel sheet. I also checked during the day to ensure that I was not missing content, especially with the stories posted. Each day, I logged on to the account not only to review content posted but would read posts, scroll through comments, and watch Instagram stories. I also joined several Instagram Live sessions throughout the month and observed the real-time conversations occurring between the influencers and their followers in this format. While I didn't physically gather each post throughout the month, any posts or stories that seemed significant to me were screen-captured and stored. As I reviewed the content, I worked on my fieldnotes, taking note of key details and crafting deeper reflections several times a week.

By the end of four weeks, I felt that I was approaching the point of theoretical saturation (Creswell, 2009) as I was not noticing anything significantly new or different from what I had already observed and captured in my field notes. While I had originally expected to do six to

eight weeks of data collection, I chose to end my netnographic immersion in the community after 32 days, after consultation and discussion with my supervisor on the matter. At this stage, I felt I had been a part of the community, albeit as a silent observer, to the point that I was confident to move to my analysis.

3.6 Analytical Framework

After completing the immersion phase of my netnography, I continued to process what I had captured in my fieldnotes, and to think about what I had noticed throughout the month. At this stage I had established a deep level of familiarity with the material through the netnographic process. Using the field notes to guide my initial reflections and observations, I used both deductive and inductive coding to analyze the material. During this time, I began to iteratively develop the key themes from the field notes and began to code my fieldnotes for key themes within the higher-order framework of the guiding ideas of performance, reputation, and appearance. As part of this thematic coding, I also wrote up several reflections on my insights using the material I had gathered which had stood out to me as examples. This helped me further refine my analysis. Ultimately, I surfaced six themes that I nested as sub-themes under Sztompka's framework of performance, reputation, and appearance. The final themes selected were discussed with my supervisor on how the select larger key themes fit within the dimensions of Sztompka's framework of trustworthiness. I will discuss these sub-themes in full in the next chapter.

3.7 Researcher's Role and Positionality

At this point, I would like to address my own role in this research and my positionality in greater depth. The experience of being embedded within the digital world of these six influencers was different for me than it would be for anyone else, because of my unique position. I refer to my interpretivist approach to this research and suggest that although the findings I discuss in the next chapter are plausible, I do not subscribe to the idea that my way is the only way to interpret the material I gathered. Other researchers looking at the same six influencers over the same time period would likely produce insights which have commonalities with those I have produced but would also likely produce alternative meanings of the material.

My role in this research process is certainly impacted by my background as an immigrant to Canada and a parent. I have two sons, aged four and two. It has been almost two years since I migrated to Canada. I moved to Canada first and the rest of my family (my husband and two kids) joined me a year later. The first year I spent in Canada without my husband and boys was difficult. I was always worried about how my children were being parented in Ghana and often share posts from parenting influencers especially topics relating to children's social and emotional health, as well as parents coping and emotional regulation. Although I kept sharing these posts with my husband, it did come in extremely handy especially when my family joined me here. This is because this new country was a whole new terrain for us as parents as we were basically starting from scratch, with no parenting manual on how to navigate the emotional and social growth of two toddlers in a new place. The manual I didn't get firsthand from extended family (usually parents where I come from), I instead got from parenting influencers, on how to parent, understand my triggers, understand the toddler stage and mind and to give myself more grace as I tried to navigate the complex environment of parenting but also the ever-changing emotional rollercoaster of two toddlers. The support I missed from my extended family was

filled by parenting influencers on various topics. As a result of the above, there is a possibility that my identity as a young parent may influence how I create understanding from my netnography.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the methodological framework guiding the study. I review netnography as a method appropriate for social media research, and explain the steps I took to select the influencer sample that I used for this study. I provide an overview of these influencers, sharing key details of their identities and credentials as parenting influencers. I then discuss my research process, reviewing how I prepared for the research, my fieldnotes, and the time I spent doing the netnography. I suggest that this netnography has allowed me to surface novel insights about the way parenting influencers communicate, and how those aspects of their communication are connected to Sztompka's dimensions of trustworthiness. I explain how I employed a thematic approach to deductively and inductively code my fieldnotes to assist with coalescing my key ideas, and then reflect on my own identity as a parent and a researcher engaging in this study. In the next chapter, I will discuss the six key themes that I surfaced in detail, providing examples to add plausibility to my findings.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I discussed the methodological and theoretical framework guiding this study. This includes a detailed account of the research methodology I employed to address the initial research questions outlined in Chapter 1. The rationale for opting for the qualitative method of digital ethnography, also referred to as netnography, was explained, emphasizing its appropriateness for this research. Additionally, chapter three explores the chosen methods for data collection and analysis, providing a comprehensive overview of the strategies used to gather and interpret data. In this chapter, I present the findings of my research, focusing on identifying themes within three main categories: performance, reputation, and appearance. Under the performance category, I identified two sub-themes emerged: the first was Education & Credentials. The second sub-theme was Commitment & Consistency. Within the reputation category, I surface the sub-themes of Cross-Promotion and Testimonials. Finally, the appearance category explores the sub-themes of Relatability of Shared and Real-life Experiences (I'm just like you Factor). I also talk about the role of physical appearance in contributing to relatability, and the broader theme of authenticity. The table below (Table 1) provides a summary of the findings under each key dimension of Sztompka framework of trustworthiness. I finally conclude the chapter with some reflections on more generalized additional findings, offering broader insights derived from the thematic exploration.

Summary of Findings		
Performance	Reputation	Appearance
Education & Credentials	Cross - Promotion	Relatability of shared and real -life experience (I'm just like you factor)
Commitment & Consistency	Testimonials (Celebrity & Audience)	Physical Appearance
		Authenticity

Table 1: Summary of Findings

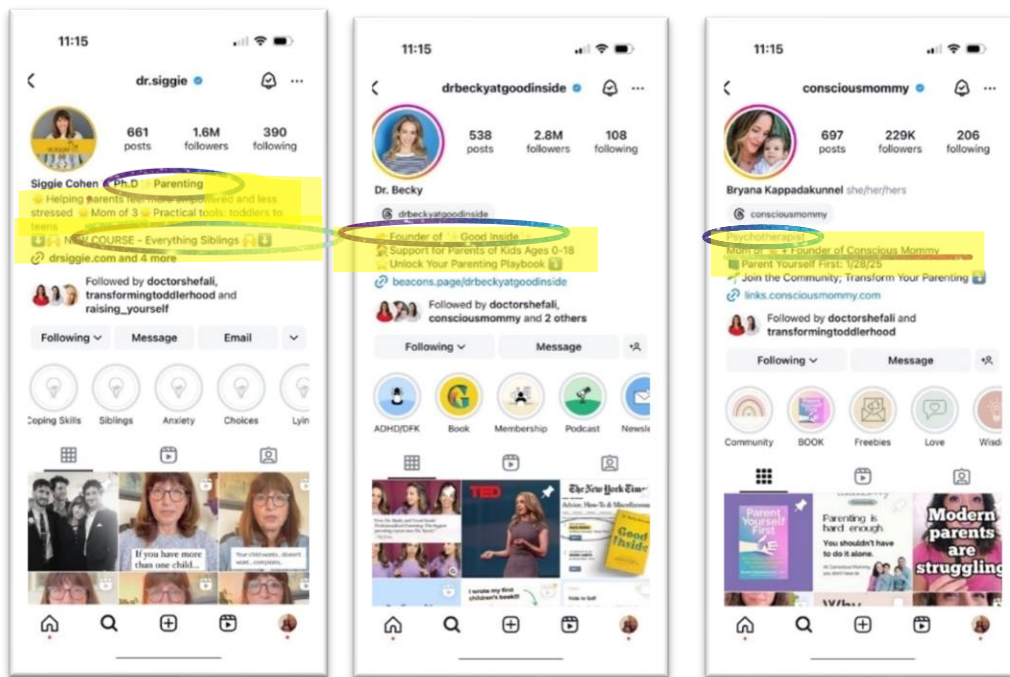
4.2 Themes Related to Performance

In this subsection, I identify and discuss two sub-themes related to performance: Education and Credentials and Commitment and Consistency. I discuss how each of these sub-themes contribute to trustworthiness on the influencer platforms.

4.2.1 Education and Credentials:

From the material I analyzed in my netnography, it was evident that the six influencers used several key tactics to show their expertise and authority in parenting in order to foster their trustworthiness. One of the primary tactics employed is the strategic creation of content that highlights their knowledge and experience in parenting. This serves to emphasize their credentials and authority in the field of parenting. The influencers I studied achieve this by emphasizing their credentials on their social media profiles, in terms of their education, qualifications, and achievements related to the parenting sphere. Some also mention their credentials when introducing themselves in their posts to highlight their expertise in the field of parenting. An example is doctorshefali who introduces herself as a “Clinical psychologist, 3 times New York Times best-selling author, host of a band-new podcast, parenting & you”

(doctorshefali, May 14, 2024). By this self-introduction, she inherently depicts and portrays herself as an authority figure in the field of parenting. This in a way may influence trust-building on the platform because some parents may trust such an influencer not because of the content posted but because of the profile behind the content shared. The profile and accompanying highlights section on the page are usually the only spaces parenting influencers have to introduce themselves to their audience. Also, all the influencers I studied took advantage of the space provided on their profiles to show why and how they are experts in parenting. That is, by intentionally stating their titles as well as their achievements, courses and specific niche of parenting that they deem themselves experts. Below are snippets of the profile pages of some of the influencers I studied, and their self-stated credentials highlighted on their profile pages.



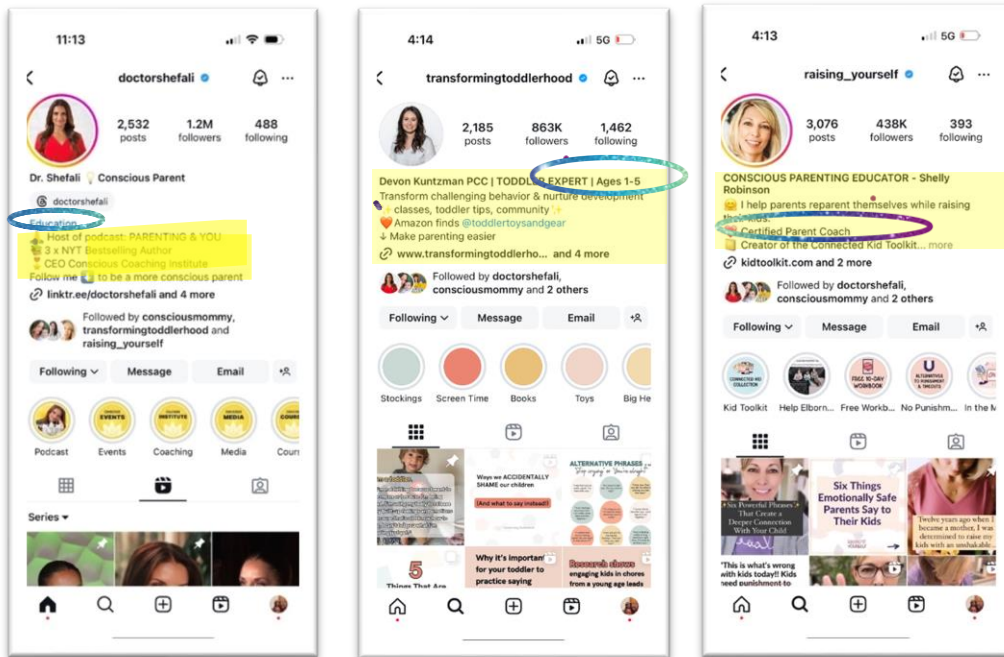


Figure 4.1 – Participating influencer profiles stating their expertise

I also noticed that when providing parenting advice, almost all the influencers continually draw on their credentials to justify their credibility for sharing parenting content online and even for critiquing and busting myths they do not necessarily agree with. For instance, while debunking certain parenting myths she came across online, consciousmommy stated the following to merit her being a certified therapist and parenting coach.

“...Some of us are licensed and have worked the 3,000 hours of supervised training, licensed clinician, many many years of graduate school and usually do some kind of upskill training, continued education” (May 29, 2024).

Through the netnographic process this emphasis on credentials became a dominant powerful theme in communicating trustworthiness. The profile is always a sort of “starter pack” to quickly know about an individual, and the influencers used that to their advantage. It also helps audiences decide whether this is the type of theme or message, person (influencer), and/or

content they are searching for to aid in their parenting journey. As I engaged in the community of parenting influencers, my starting point as a researcher, person, and mother was always to look at the credentials' influencers have, to make them an authority in a particular field of parenting.

Focusing on their education and credentials this way is useful to highlight performance, as Sztompka (1999) defines it. By drawing on these aspects, influencers are able to add legitimacy for their audiences, regardless of what they actually say. This focus on credentials is consistent with literature (Jetter, 2024) that highlights formal training and expertise as a way of enhancing perceived authority, in her study on spiritual influencers as a source of authority in the current digitalized era. I suggest that by seeing the focus on education and credentials as part of the performance dimension of trustworthiness, it is plausible to consider influencers as adding to their audiences' perceptions of their own trustworthiness, as well as authority.

4.2.2 Commitment and Consistency

While engaged in my netnography, I noticed that all the influencers seemed to be on a fixed schedule of posting content. Influencers posted on their feed or their stories, sometimes both, almost daily. This commitment and consistency to their pages depicts their level of dedication to creating content as well as actively engaging with their audiences and responding to their messages and comments, thereby fostering audience's trust in them as parent influencers. The consistency of content creation is a prominent theme observed in their adherence to regular posting schedules across various social media platforms. This finding is coherent with the literature reviewed as . Kim & Johnson, (2016) postulate that influencers typically maintain a consistent presence by posting daily updates on their feeds or stories. This regularity ensures that their audience receives a steady stream of content related to parenting, reinforcing the influencer's dedication to their niche and maintaining audience engagement over time. This

commitment may be particularly noteworthy in the parenting influencer context, as parents often turn to this content at times of desperation or great need. Being consistently visible on stories, for example, like most of my influencers were, may help convey that they are an ally to parents in need, and there when needed.

As I observed the parenting platforms of the influencers under study, I became familiar with the parenting post schedule of the various influencers and how religious they were about it. For instance, doctorshefali posted her podcast intro every Tuesday, and excerpts on every Wednesday and Thursday while conscioumommy and dr.siggie posted their introductory topics on Mondays. However, an interesting post from conscioumommy was always her pole dancing sessions which she shared in her stories every Wednesday. Also, conscioumommy posted daily on both feed and timeline and dr.siggie posted daily on her story but not on her feed, which was done occasionally. This is in contrast to the parenting influencer, raising_yourself, who hardly posted on stories but maintained a schedule to provide parenting tips and quotes on her feed. Although the influencers hardly posted on Sundays, all the influencers posted new content at the start of the week.

Influencers posting frequently contributed to being perceived as trustworthy. This is especially true as they continually provided their audience with fresh and captivating content, eliciting interactions from their community. Perspectives were shared on each page and tips to engage with, and all content shared was always related to their parenting message. It also speaks to reliability, which is a key concept of trustworthiness. Consistently being in the feed of audiences when they are not specifically searching means an influencer's messages are always in the minds of their audiences. Also, their consistency with posting is a sign of influencers demonstrating a trait of reliability, loyalty and dedication to their audience. Their dedicated

effort in posting, regular engagements, responding to questions and moderating interactions on their pages plays a significant role in building trust with their audience. Influencers' regular posting and engagement not only help to retain existing followers but also attract new ones who appreciate the dependable presence of these parenting influencers.

4.3 Themes Related to Reputation

Sztompka's second dimension of trustworthiness is reputation. I identified two sub-themes that fit well under the dimension of reputation: cross-promotion and testimonials.

4.3.1 Cross-promotion (Peer-to-Peer Influencer Support)

Throughout the netnographic process, one major theme that stood out was cross-promotion, or peer-to-peer support among parenting influencers. It was interesting to me that the parenting influencer community continually supported each other by actively endorsing and promoting each other's content to enhance visibility and engagement within their shared communities. Even within the relatively small group of parenting influencers I selected for this study, I later realized they all followed each other and engaged with one another's content by liking and reposting each other's pages and content. The theme of cross-promotion extended beyond the group of accounts selected for this study to the wider and tight-knit parenting influencer group. A prime example of cross-promotion with influencers wholly supporting, validating and endorsing each other's content was evident during the launch of doctorshefali's new podcast titled "Parenting & You". This was demonstrated in various ways. For example, Terri Cole, a psychotherapist, author and relationship and boundary expert, featured doctorshefali in a live interview on her page @terricole, to talk about "love, growth, relationships, parenting, all the things...AND her new pod Parenting & YOU with doctorshefali where in every episode she coaches REAL parents in REAL time" (May 16, 2024). Other

influencers like Dr. Tracy Dalgeish/@drtracyd a psychologist, couples' therapist, and author featured doctorshefali new podcast on May 17th with the caption "We learn through stories. I'm BEYOND thrilled to share doctorshefali new podcast...I already took a deep dive and it's a must listen because we have so much to learn." Additionally, influencers @concioumommy, @healwithkelly and @kristinakuzmic shared the new podcast information on their stories, urging their followers to listen to the podcast and endorsing doctorshefali as a parenting expert. On May 27th, doctorshefali also posted a reel on her feed about @kristinaKuzmic called "I can fix this and other lies I told myself while parenting my struggling child".

I suggest that this cross-promotion is an important element of trustworthiness as a dimension of reputation. Although this adds to the overall community building, it also offers parent audiences an endorsement of other parent influencers who are considered trustworthy within the parent influencer community. It means that influencers are able to have others highlight the value of their content, building their reputations to external audiences. The theme of cross-promotion within the data was very strong, and not necessarily expected based on what I found in existing literature.

4.3.2 Testimonials

Similar to cross-promotion is the theme of testimonials. While I use the term cross-promotion to refer to peer-to-peer support within the parenting influencer community, there were also promotions that occurred in different ways from outside this direct community. For example, numerous celebrities promoted some of the content posted by the influencers I was following. Celebrity endorsement, I suggest, acts as a form of testimonial for the influencer to their wider parental audiences. In addition to celebrity endorsement, parent influencers would also post testimonials from parents. These two approaches, while on opposite ends of the

testimonial spectrum (from celebrity to normal parent) allows the influencers to further emphasize their reputation on their social media pages.

4.3.2.1 Celebrity Testimonials

Although it was evident that among the small group of influencers, once a new project was developed the influencers focused on promoting content within their circles, this recognition extended beyond the influencer landscape to the outside world into the world of celebrities. One example of this is related to when doctorshefali launched her podcast. A tactic that she used was sharing what other celebrities are saying about her on her page and on the celebrity's page. For instance, @melrobbins shares that doctorshefali is an expert in "giving world-class parenting advice that has absolutely changed my life"(May 15, 2024). Similarly, other high-profile individuals like Eva Mendes responds to this launch by stating doctorshefali is an expert in conscious parenting, "a teacher", "instrumental in how I have raised my kids, a master of live coaching" (May 15, 2024). Oprah Winfrey also posts about doctorshefali, saying that she is her favourite parenting coach after all her years of the Oprah Winfrey show. doctorshefali is featured on @oprahdaily, and this feature was reposted by doctorshefali with a thank you message in her caption: "Thank you @oprahdaily for sharing the launch of my new podcast: PARENTING AND YOU with doctorshefali" (May 14, 2024). Pink adds her voice to say doctorshefali is her "go to" and that she can't wait to listen to it (May 15, 2024). This recognition and validation by celebrities in various industries outside the parenting influencer world like music (@Pink), acting (@evalogoria), lifestyle/wellbeing (@melrobbins) contribute to the reputation of the influencers, especially in increasing their visibility and reach. These endorsements and collaborations greatly influence the reputation of influencers, increasing their trustworthiness by being projected by these well-known public figures as experts in their niche.

Throughout the process of collecting data, I noticed that often the posts with high levels of engagement were posts that featured cross-promotions from influencers within the parenting sphere or celebrity endorsements. I suggest that by promoting the content of other parenting influencers, the parent influencers are able to project that they are confident and comfortable with their expertise; the space is not competitive, but rather a space where everyone (who is deemed legitimate by the community) is able to be supported. This contributes to an idealized version of the influencer space, where influencers promote a reputation of themselves and others who engage in their world as friendly, accepting, and collaborative. In addition, the celebrity endorsements of influencers add a prestige factor, contributing to their reputation as experts. By receiving endorsements from celebrities, influencers are able to trade on the reputation of that celebrity, increasing their own cache to their audience.

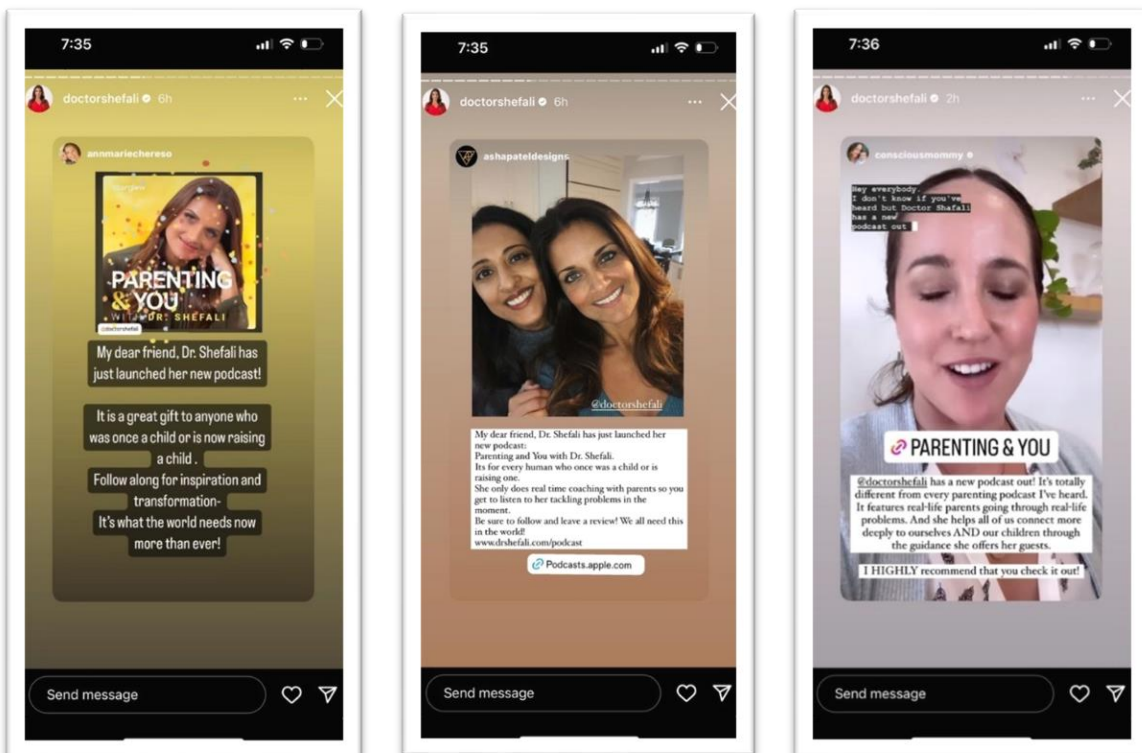


Figure 4.2 Story Post of influencer promotion (May 14, 2024)

4.3.2.2 Audience Testimonials

Another important aspect to discuss are the testimonials from followers, as this also emerged as a sub-theme as I considered reputation throughout my netnographic process. It became clear throughout my netnography that parent influencers also rely significantly on testimonials from their followers, or audiences, to bolster their credibility and trustworthiness. Influencers regularly reshared the testimonials of regular parents. These would be official or unofficial testimonials. For example, influencers would share a screenshot of a direct message that they had received from a parent on Instagram, stating how much that influencer had helped them. For example, dr.siggie shared a message from on her story from one of her followers which read “I tried potty methods and yours is the 1 that helped and worked!! It’s the special book” (May 13, 2024). Although this is not a long and detailed testimonial, sharing it allows dr.siggie to show that parents are making use of her content and finding success. Additionally, the testimonial is clearly informal, and likely not solicited, which allows dr.siggie to show her expertise and usefulness without seeming too contrived. Most of the influencers I followed shared these types of messages very frequently, and almost daily would feature this type of content. Sharing these types of messages was very frequent, and happened almost daily.

Another example came from raising_yourself, who shared a lengthier message from a follower struggling to communicate with their teenage son. The follower had employed one of raising_yourself’s strategies for communicating with success. This message said, “I read [the] seven cards to my 13 year old son. Afterwards he gave me a hug. Ten mins later he said hey dad if you want tomorrow after school we can work on my violin lesson together. Something he’s otherwise usually resistant to. Really appreciate having The Words” (May 13, 2024). This message offers a more detailed testimonial, highlighting the way that the father had success with the son, and conveying a hopefulness to followers who might feel they struggle to communicate

successfully with their teenagers. This message and another testimonial example are shown in Figure 4.3 below.

It is likely that behind the scenes, these influencers are not receiving only good messages, and it is important to remember that they are likely selecting the messages to share with their broader audiences on stories or posts in a very careful way. They aren't simply sharing positive words, but rather, I suggest, sharing the testimonials that connect to key content they want to promote – such as potty-training content in the example above. The curation of this audience testimonial content allows influencers to emphasize their reputation as experts, while conveniently offering opportunities to promote their courses and work to other audience members. While third-party endorsement likely helps with trustworthiness, as the research evidence shows that individuals are likely to trust opinions from fellow consumers or peers (Lou & Yuan, 2019) it is also interesting to see how the influencers use the testimonials for multiple purposes.

I suggest that these audience testimonials serve as social proof, affirming the authenticity and reliability of parent influencers' advice, recommendations, and narratives. These testimonials are vital in fostering a sense of community and trust among the audience members, as they provide real-life validation of the influencer's claims and assertions. This then builds their reputation by demonstrating that their content resonates with ordinary individuals and parents facing similar challenges and experiences. However, I also suggest that sharing these audience testimonials is a strategic choice and an intentional form of communication that allows the influencers to highlight their expertise in their field. These testimonials tend to act as a form of social validation, affirming the influencer's authority and expertise within the parenting niche. When audience members endorse an influencer through testimonials, and those testimonials are

shared, they contribute to the influencer's perceived status as a knowledgeable and trustworthy source of information. This validation not only enhances the influencer's reputation but also encourages new audience members to engage with their content, thereby expanding not just their reach and influence but also their trustworthiness.

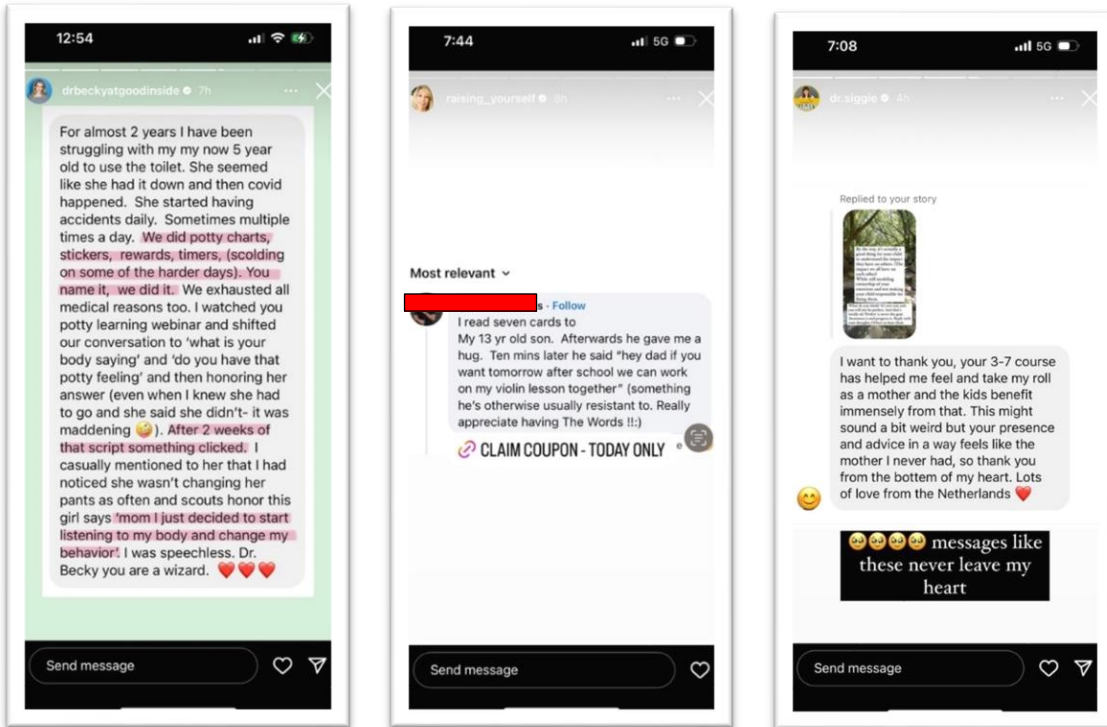


Figure 4.3 – Audience Testimonials.

The themes which I discuss in this section – cross promotion, celebrity endorsements and audience testimonials – are all related to influencer reputation. The specific strategy of emphasizing endorsements and positive testimonials from others, I suggest, is a novel insight that allows us to better understand how reputation is communicated and conveyed to increase trustworthiness. By viewing this type of content as reputation-related through the lens of Sztompka’s framework, we can understand that it does not only serve the purpose of promoting

the influencer's paid content or their public Instagram page and presence, but also the purpose of increasing the value or capital of their reputation. Endorsements from celebrities such as Oprah, or even other well-known and popular influencers or celebrity influencers contributes to the overall reputation of the influencer, making them appear more trustworthy on this reputational dimension specifically.

4.4 Themes Related to Appearance

In this sub-section, I discuss the two broad themes that emerged from my netnography as related to appearance: Relatability of Shared and Real-life Experiences and Originality and Authenticity. Under these broad themes, I discuss specifics related to physical appearance, use of language, and story-telling as communication tactics that appear to be employed by the influencers to contribute to trustworthiness.

4.4.1 Relatability of Shared and Real-life Experiences (“I’m just like you Factor”)

One common theme that emerged through my analysis was the sharing of genuine personal experiences related to parenting. I describe this as the “I’m just like you factor.” The influencers constantly communicated their relatability by striving to appear like an everyday parent. They shared their own, apparently genuine, experiences with parenting, tying it in with their expert content to reinforce the practicality of their parenting advice, strategies and tactics. Although it is evident that some have assistants online to aid in their content creation, the parenting influencers I followed clearly strive to connect their online personas with their everyday experiences as they address common challenges they encounter in their role as regular parents and not as experts. This separation of the person from the expert seemed intentional as a way to reassure the audience of the challenges of parenting, regardless of knowledge and expertise. I observed that they continually shared their lived experiences, addressing and

discussing common challenges and feelings they (and the audience, parents) encounter, fostering a shared experience that positioned them as relatable. For example, Transforming Toddlerhood, recounts her day in her May 29 posts, sharing her frustrations with the day, that she was bickering with her husband, and that she had even snapped at her two-year-old. In sharing this type of information with her audience, she goes through the process of reevaluating her emotions in what is presented as real-time self-reflection, ultimately sharing a key takeaway for her audience after processing the frustrations of her day:

“The key takeaway here is to remember that we are HUMAN we make mistakes and assumptions whether it’s with our parenting partner or our children. When we change the way we respond to our big feelings, we are breaking generational cycles and this means having conversations about the things that trigger us instead of reacting in the moment. View yourself as your child’s Loving Leader & Guide instead of an enforcer. And seeing your children for who they are instead of who you want them to be” (May 29, 2024).

By intentionally sharing her emotional struggle and the process of its repair, Transforming Toddlerhood is able to show how normal it is to make mistakes, even as an expert, while also demonstrating how the skills she shares in her content helps her and can help her audience.

This echoes Petersen's (2017) findings in a study on mommy bloggers which suggested that these types of bloggers often recount their own challenges, successes, and learning moments. It is interesting, though not unexpected, that the parenting influencers I followed on Instagram employ a similar strategy. I suggest this makes them appear more authentic. By openly discussing both the triumphs and tribulations of parenthood, influencers present themselves as authentic individuals navigating similar realities as their followers, eliciting trust from their

audience. From my study, parenting influencers, projecting themselves as vulnerable parents, but also experts, share their lessons learned throughout their journey. This helps them appear as normal parents, just like their audiences. However, I suggest that presenting themselves this way is likely intentional; it is a strategy for relating to others. I found myself wondering throughout the netnographic process whether the challenging moments that some of the influencers described really occurred, or really did happen. Although they appear authentic, it does seem likely that this appearance of authenticity, of being ‘just like you,’ is not genuine, but rather part of their planned content creation, with the recognition that presenting themselves in this way makes them more relatable, and thus more trustworthy.

Despite the skepticism described above, I noticed that my own identity as a parent did lead me to feel drawn toward this type of content. For example, drbeckyatgoodinside shared about her struggles with her child, who she describes as a Deeply Feeling Kid (DFK). In sharing her struggles, drbeckyatgoodinside emphasized how her own challenges with her DFK led her to create a new course for her parent audiences. Although she was sharing about her own challenges in a seemingly authentic way, and thereby presenting herself as a parent facing challenges day-to-day, just like me, she then used this appearance of normalcy to promote a product. That said, I did find the parenting advice and scripts that she offered as part of this content very relatable and useful to employ with my own children! As I engaged more with the content, I continually pondered over some of her strategies and applied them to my parenting journey, making me more empathetic and present from the lessons learned from her shared examples. Although I was conscious of drbeckyatgoodinside’s aim to sell a product, I nonetheless was drawn in by how she presented herself as a parent who has also struggled. This relatability, the connection that the parenting influencers made as one parent to another parent,

did seem a significant piece of what allows parenting influencers to build their trustworthiness. Erin Duffy et al. (2024) suggest that personal vulnerability is crucial to building community and accruing followers, and I suggest that in the parent influencer domain, this certainly remains important. Through relatable anecdotes and emotions related specifically to parenting, parent influencers activate a sense of empathy and connection among their parent audiences. I suggest that this "I'm just like you" factor fosters a sense of bond, friendship, and solidarity within the parenting community, positioning influencers as trusted peers rather than distant unrelatable experts. This underscores the importance of this theme, and its connection with the construct of appearance helps emphasize how appearing relatable can potentially impact trustworthiness.

4.4.1.1 Physical Appearance

In connection with this theme of relatability is the sub-theme of physical appearance. Throughout the netnographic process, I noticed the varied ways that the parent influencers seemed to actively curate their actual appearance, in order to resonate with their audience and align with their content. For example, when talking about the difficulties of parenting, or the challenges of a particular day, it was common for the influencers to post on their stories wearing loungewear, such as sweatpants, with their hair undone and no makeup. For example, drbeckyatgoodinside shared a story on May 16, 2024 about a challenge with her child. In this story, she appears to be wearing no make-up, her hair is pulled up in a messy style, and she is wearing a relaxed sleeveless t-shirt (See Figure 4.4). She looks just like a normal person would look around their own house after a long day. In contrast, when drbeckyatgoodinside was invited to participate in a conference on digital parenting, she posted a picture of herself to her Instagram stories, showing her in a highly professional outfit. Her hair is smooth and styled, she is wearing make-up, and appears to be wearing professional-style clothing. The contrast in

physical appearance from drbeckyatgoodinside – the parenting expert, and drbeckyatgoodinside – the mom just like you, is carefully communicated, I suggest through the clothing choice.

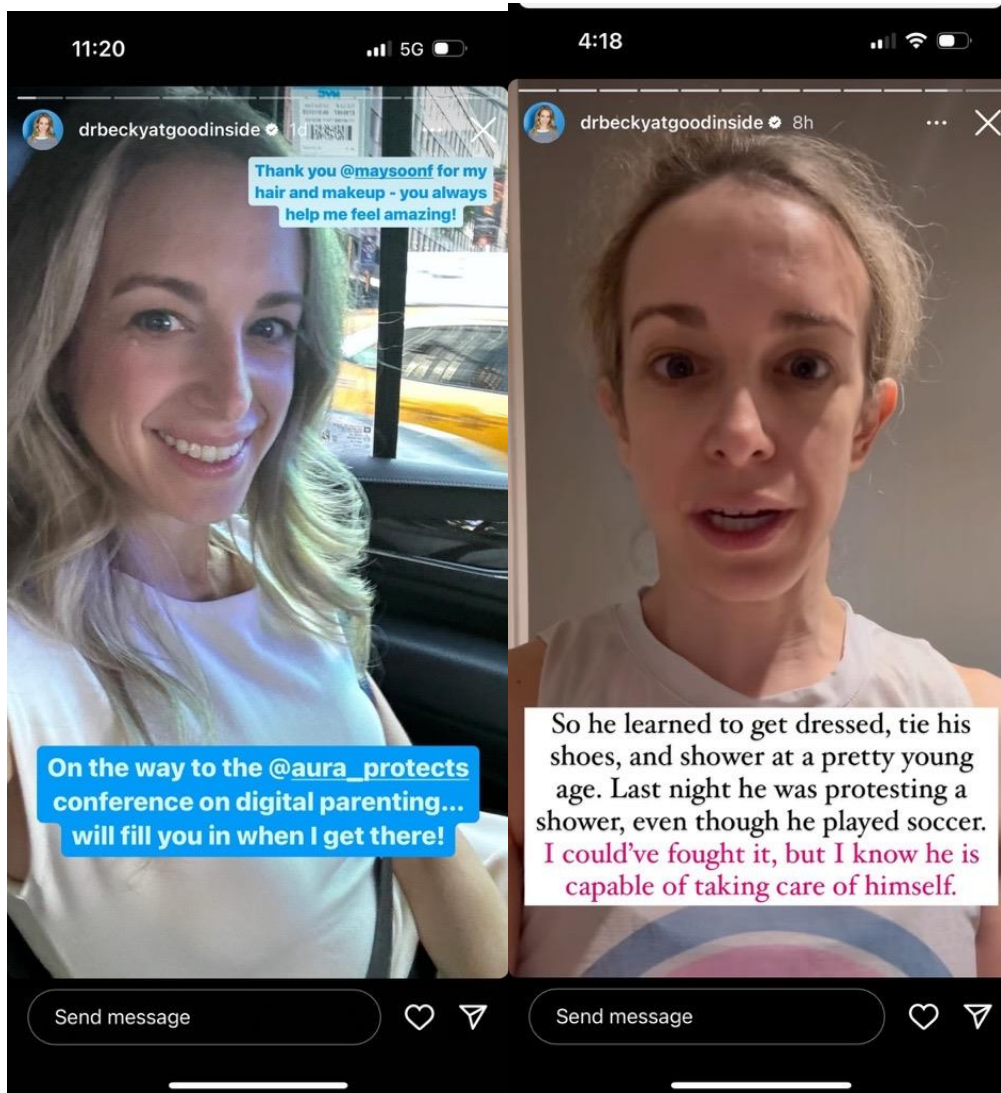


Figure 4.4 Stories captured from drbeckyatgoodinside, showing her fully made up on her way to a conference (June 5, 2024) and an early morning story in which she describes a challenge with her son (May 16, 2024).

The choice to appear as a tired, struggling parent, versus a knowledgeable and credible expert in the field is context-specific, of course, but also seems to be an intentional strategy,

based on what I noticed in my netnography. Drbeckyatgoodinside was not the only influencer who appeared to intentionally post both physical selves. Recognizing this intentional strategy made me question the apparent authenticity of influencers. For example, conscioumommy and doctorshefali were two other influencers who I noticed frequently showed themselves in this contrasted way. While doctorshefali would show herself dressed in a very formal outfit, with full make-up when presenting at a summit or promoting her podcast. However, she also cultivated more relaxed moments with her audiences, hosting live videos and posting on stories in her loungewear and without any make-up. Conscioumommy also frequently posted on her stories with no makeup. More so than even the clothing, it seemed to me that the use of make-up and hairstyling was used most intentionally by the influencers to demonstrate their different versions: the parenting expert wears makeup, while the parent does not.

I noted this regularly throughout the netnographic process, regularly enough that it appeared significant enough to emerge as a theme connected to the idea of relatability. Part of how parent influencers appear to show their relatability is not just through sharing their difficult and challenging parenting experiences, as I discussed in the previous section, but also through aligning that those difficult moments with an appearance that conveys that struggle. By appearing tired, unmade-up, in lounge-style clothing, the influencers appeared to be reflecting who they see as their audience. I posit that they make content with this type of appearance not because they necessarily are being authentic, but rather because that's what they feel their audience looks like. For example, I myself would often be reviewing their daily content in my pajamas, feeling exhausted after a long day struggling to parent my boys effectively and patiently. Although I was interrogating their reasons for appearing on their social platform with no makeup or in pajamas, I did also feel seen, understood, and related to! Again, I felt myself

very much drawn in by their apparent relatability, as in the prior section. However, it wasn't just about what they were sharing verbally, but also about what they were communicating physically. The power of physical appearance was surprising to me throughout the netnographic process.

Despite being surprised at how powerful physical appearance impacted me personally, and how prevalent the difference in physical appearance seemed throughout the netnographic process, there is literature to suggest that one's online representation of oneself is done both explicitly and implicitly (Labrecque et al., 2011). In the domain of parenting influencers, I noticed that the influencers combined the formal presentation of content and themselves with informal, behind-the-scenes moments into their lives. Integrating these apparently unscripted glimpses into their personal lives allows the influencers to implicitly communicate their relatability through their appearance, not just through the explicit communication of their words and content. The management of physical appearance by the parenting influencers I observed serves a dual purpose. On one hand, formal attire enhances credibility and professionalism, particularly in contexts requiring expertise and authority. On the other hand, occasional glimpses into casual attire or spontaneous updates foster relatability and humanize the influencer's persona. I suggest that this combination of polished presentation and apparently authentic sharing contributes to building trust and connection with the audience. By adapting their attire and presentation style to match the context of their messaging while also sharing glimpses of their everyday lives, the parenting influencers ultimately appear more trustworthy.

4.4.2 Authenticity

The next theme that I discuss I have called authenticity. During my netnographic process, I noticed that the notion of authenticity seems to have a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of online interactions. Authenticity, or the influencer's authentic self, is communicated through language and storytelling, and underscores the influencers' efforts to cultivate genuine

connections by sharing personal, unfiltered experiences in real time. Although this is similar to relatability, I suggest that it is distinct in that the examples I share to explain this theme focus on the influencers being more ‘themselves.’ Relatability, as described above, is more focused on influencers appearing genuine, but reflecting their audience by appearing just like them as much as possible. The authentic self that I suggest influencers communicate serves to make them distinct from other influencers, as well as to allow them to foster connections with their audiences outside of the identity of parent.

One example of this is the display of emotion. Throughout my netnography, I noticed that influencers candidly express their emotions. I noticed this as part of their intention to connect in a relatable way with other parents, but beyond this relatability, there were also expressions of stress, happiness, frustration and surprise that were related more to the experience of being an influencer, living life online, struggling to keep up with adult demands, and more. For example, one day consciousmommy openly discussed her frustration over technical glitches in her recordings. In her expression of frustration, she is not a parent, she is not relating with other parents; rather, I suggest that she is an influencer, authentically communicating her emotional self within that identity. In this example, she states how angry she is that she has recorded videos for the entire month of June only to realize that there is a technical issue. The story captured in Figure 4.5 from this instance on June 1, 2024 shows her looking discouraged and upset, with text describing the situation.



Figure 4.5 Story post documenting raw emotions (June 1st, 2024)

Aside from sharing their feelings, the influencers also documented intimate moments of their lives outside of their parenting niche. I was struck by how much the influencers I followed seemed to bare their souls to their audiences in their posts, speaking directly to their audiences as if they were sharing with close friends. For example, dr.siggie posted a series of stories reflecting on turning 66. Figure 4.6 shows these stories. She shares how silly she feels for making a fuss about her birthday at her advanced age, and how she struggled with even sharing it online. Although she uses the subsequent two stories to offer advice to her audience, the initial intimacy of sharing her age and fear of aging feels highly personal. I suggest that this perception of intimacy shared between influencers and their audiences contributes to the idea that the influence is sharing an authentic self, and therefore is genuinely connected with their audiences. Although I do not discuss parasocial relationships in detail in this thesis, I did notice how this type of

content fostered those parasocial connections, making influencers seem like genuine and loyal friends to their audiences. This was interesting to me given my focus on the parent influencer domain, as I would have expected more emphasis on the personal, authentic and intimate self from lifestyle influencers, for example. The idea that this authenticity, which I suggest is distinct from relatability, is a feature of this realm as well is an interesting outcome of my netnography.

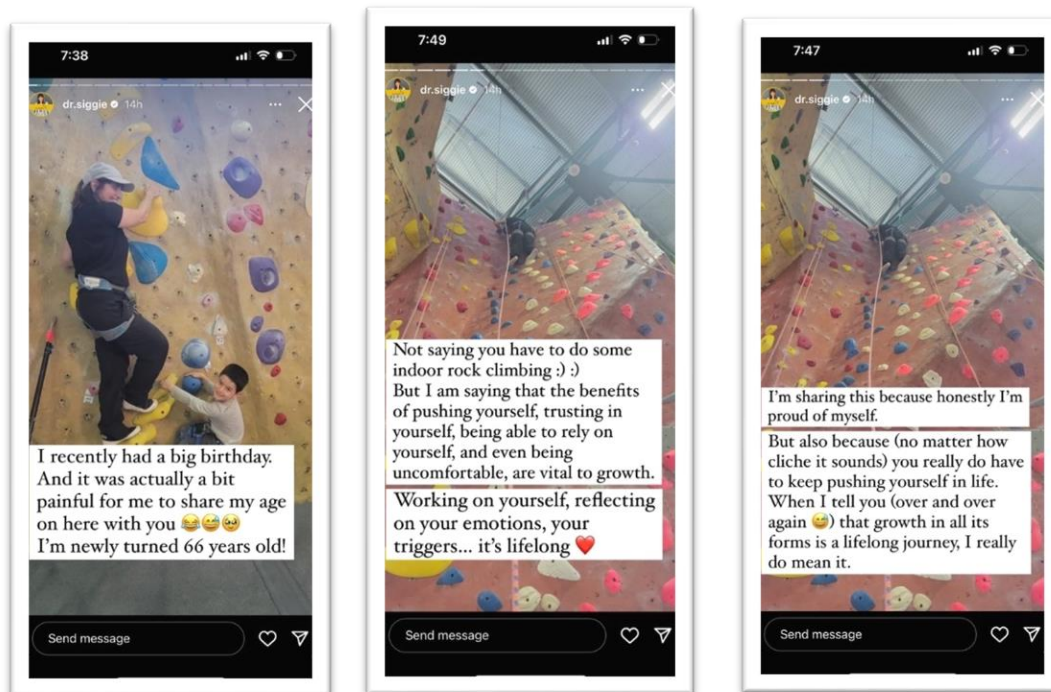


Figure 4.6- Story post share intimate moments of their lives (May 25th, 2024)

A final example related to authenticity and this intimate level of sharing that I want to highlight is from consciousmommy. Each week, consciousmommy shares pole dancing content on her Instagram stories. She calls pole dancing her 'happy sport' and shares grateful she is for the activity, as it has allowed her to get in touch with herself and her body and build her confidence. She also talks about the insecurities she felt about her body in the past, and shows how pole dancing movements have allowed her to become stronger and more fit. While consciousmommy describes receiving lots of positive messages from her audience regarding this

content, she also shares that she receives negative feedback, with some members of her follower community suggesting that someone who is a parenting expert should not post provocative content. To accommodate these members of her following, consciousmommy provides a warning story before her pole dancing content each week, urging those who are uncomfortable with that content to click through her stories. (See Figure 4.7 for an example of this type of warning story.) However, consciousmommy also challenges the idea that parents can't be sexy or do less traditional activities such as these. I found myself wondering why she shares this content if she knows it may alienate some of her followers, and once again connected this to the revealing of the authentic self. I genuinely believe that she is passionate about the activity, and by sharing the content, despite it being somewhat controversial, consciousmommy is authentically communicating her identity outside of being a parent. I suggest that by offering her non-parent self in this way to her audience, she is again cultivating an authentic appearance, contributing overall to trustworthiness.

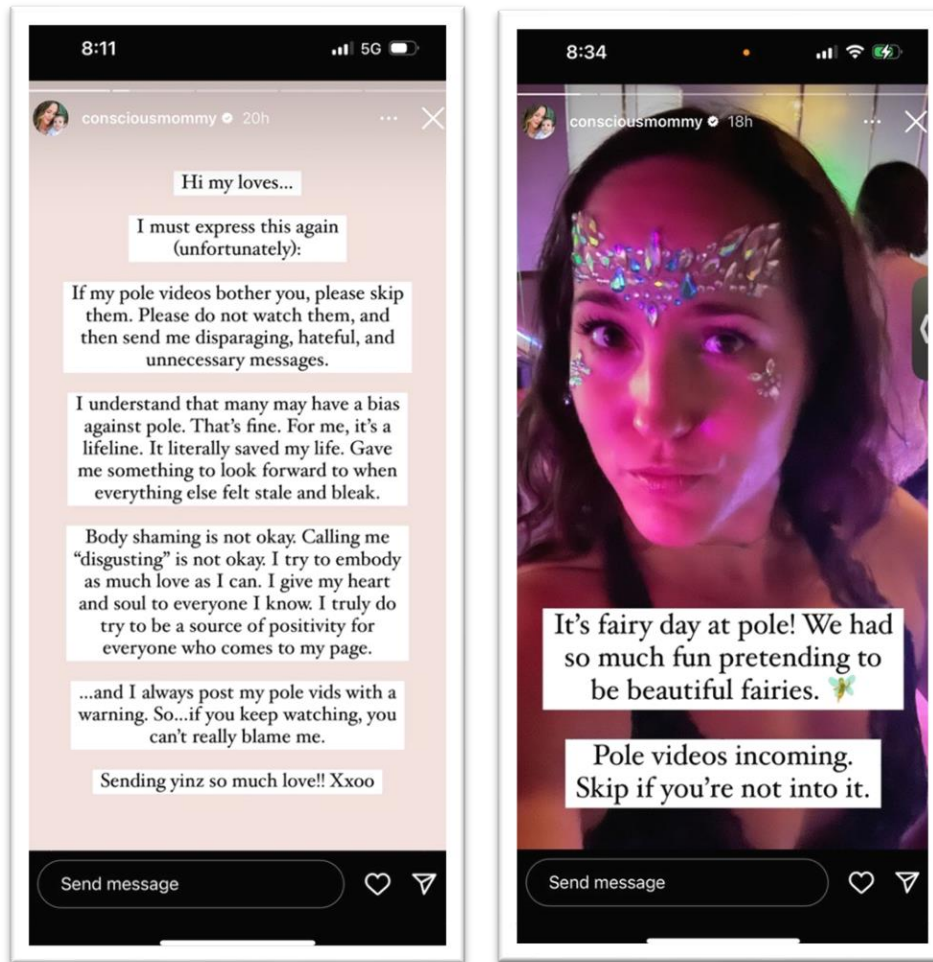


Figure 4.7 – Pole dancing Story Post: May 24th and May 30, 2024

From my observations, I realized that the practice of being authentic through emotional transparency and personal sharing serves multiple functions within the influencer ecosystem. Firstly, it establishes a sense of authenticity by presenting a raw, unvarnished portrayal of the influencer's life, thereby fostering a deeper connection with the audience. By openly acknowledging setbacks and challenges and sharing snippets of their lives, not just as a parent, but as individuals, influencers appear more realistic and authentic. These qualities likely resonate strongly with followers seeking genuine connections in a digital landscape often perceived as curated and polished. Moreover, I suggest that the deliberate showcasing of authentic emotions

contributes to the influencers' trustworthiness. This is line with existing literature that suggests audiences are more likely to trust and engage with content that feels authentic and sincere, compared to content perceived as contrived or overly scripted (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Thus, the strategic deployment of authenticity as an individual not only enhances the influencers' personal brand but also strengthens the bond of trust between them and their audience, perhaps contributing to long-term engagement from audiences.

4.5 Additional Findings

I have coalesced the key themes discussed so far in this chapter under Sztompka's (1999) dimensions of trustworthiness. To summarize, I identified 1) education and credentials and 2) commitment and consistency under themes related to performance. Under themes related to reputation, I talk about peer-to-peer cross-promotion and celebrity and non-celebrity testimonials. Under themes related to appearance, I discuss relatability and the connection of physical appearance to relatability, as well as authenticity. I suggest that parent influencers intentionally communicate information related to their education and credentials to demonstrate their performance as parent experts in their careers thus far; that they intentionally commit to consistent performance online through their posting; that the concept of peer-to-peer cross promotion is critical to their reputation; that testimonials from celebrities and every day individuals further contribute to their reputation; that relatability, physical appearance and authenticity are critical dimensions of appearance, and that taken altogether, these themes as organized within Sztompka's framework of trustworthiness allow us to understand some of the important strategies for conveying trustworthiness within the parent influencer domain on Instagram.

However, in addition to these thematic insights from my netnographic process, I noticed other nuances that seemed significant, but did not necessarily warrant inclusion as themes. I include these observations here to emphasize the depth of the netnographic process in terms of offering insights into this community. I will pick up on some of these additional findings as potential areas for future research in my final chapter.

4.5.1 Deliberate Word Choice

One of the additional observations I noticed was related to the linguistic choices made by influencers. For example, doctorshefali frequently used words such as “authentic,” “raw” and “real life” in her discussions of her content. By using these words, she perhaps further solidifies the idea in her audience that her content is these things. I noticed other influencer use similar words, speaking regularly about the importance of being authentic, for example, or about how they were showing “real life” in their relatable content. Further, when engaging with their community, such as through making comments, the word choice and approach seemed very deliberate. For example, Figure 4.8 provides a screen capture of a comment to a follower from doctorshefali. Doctorshefali responds to a comment from an audience member with a gentle reminder not to be judgmental, stating “judgement is never the answer” (doctorshefali, May 16.2024). The way doctorshefali interacts and chooses the words for that interaction seems to reflect the messages of her content; by making statements to her followers that are a similar tone and approach to those that she suggests followers try stating to their children, she demonstrates consistency with her broader message and expertise.

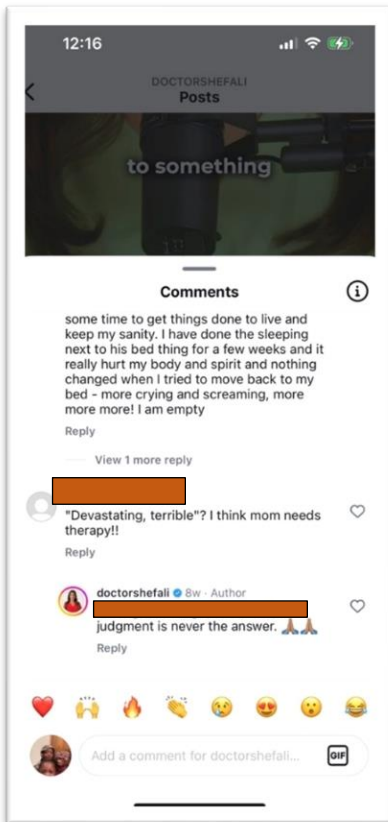


Figure 4.8 - Doctorshefali positively guiding the interactions on her page.

4.5.2 Storytelling

Another feature of the community that I noticed in my netnographic process was the broad communication approach. The tone of information delivery was usually a conversational tone and style, and although influencers used different ways of communicating depending on the context, storytelling as a communication approach was used very frequently. Rather than sharing what parents should do in particular situations, most of the influencers regularly told stories from their experience or the experiences of parents they had worked with, in order to communicate their message. For example, drbeckyatgoodinside would share stories from her professional practice rather than simply sharing advice. She often would begin by stating something like, “There is this girl I was helping in my practice who...” or “I just met a family who was

experiencing...”. She would then continue to describe the situation, explaining the advice she had offered and the outcome it had helped the family reach. Drbeckyatgoodinside also frequently asked followers to reflect on the story and to share their reflections in the comments. For example, in a video post from May 16, 2024 in which she describes the importance of letting children struggle in safe environments so they can build resilience by sharing a story about her son forgetting her jacket, she asks her followers to think about how they could empower their children and help them become more resilient. This post had high engagement, with 428 comments and over 1.4 million plays. The story she told to communicate the importance of empowering children through allowing them to struggle a little bit led to hundreds of comments from her audience sharing their experiences and challenges. I suggest that this was successful largely because of the story she told, versus simply stating factual information’s about the importance of this aspect of building emotional and social skills in children. Overall, I noticed that a good and relatable story is appreciated by all. From reading through the comment sections, I observed the general agreement across the audiences and how they agreed to conversations in terms of stories shared and the relatable parenting advice given. However, I noticed that one key strength in these moments and many of the deliveries of these parenting influencers is the ability to cause parents to reflect which I have certainly done as I engaged with most of the content.

4.5.3 Product Promotion

Another insight from my netnography that I feel is important to mention is the extent to which all of these influencers promoted products, encouraging their audience to purchase items from them or from affiliated links or advertisers. All the influencers were selling something, either a service or a product. Their products included online courses or similar resources, and services included special coaching sessions that could be booked by followers. In addition to

their own products and services, influencers also worked with advertisers on paid partnerships and used affiliate links to make money when a follower purchased a product using their specific link. For example, transformingtoddlerhood would often post products she recommended from Amazon, offering discount codes to her followers. However, as part of this, she also received money from Amazon each time someone used her link to purchase the product. Although I suggest that the influencers intentionally cultivate a relatable approach and appear authentic, this type of selling behaviour does complicate the dynamic of trustworthiness. As a parent, I felt conflicted about some of the recommendations to purchase items from third parties like Amazon. How could I know if these were legitimate recommendations or simply part of a scheme to make as much money as possible from their followers? While it seemed to me more expected for other types of influencers to promote purchasing products on their platforms, parenting experts who focus on social and emotional health seemed to me like a less-likely group of individuals to be promoting products. However, being embedded in the netnographic process revealed how much selling underpins the expert content and information being shared by these individuals.

4.5.4 Reflections

As I embedded myself into the parenting influencer community through the netnographic process, I found myself being drawn into the content as a parent, as I've mentioned throughout this chapter. However, I also found myself being skeptical as a researcher and consumer as I noticed how much content was directed towards encouraging me to purchase resources from or products promoted by the influencers. For example, I signed up for a free potty-training course from drbeckyatgoodinside, and regularly received automated emails that were "just checking in." These emails seemed designed to keep me connected with the community and encourage me to

purchase paid resources. While I understand that this is a marketing strategy, it did make me feel less trusting of the content as a result.

I also noticed that parenting influencers constantly emphasize and reemphasize why they do what they do, particularly in their stories. For example, doctorshefali regularly states that she aims to help parents understand child psychology, reparent themselves, and provide concrete tools and strategies. They frequently restate their purpose, but when faced with negative or challenging comments on posts, I noticed that influencers would often remove these statements. If the parenting influencers I followed are motivated by their overarching purpose of educating parents, why do they need to carefully moderate and control their comment sections to avoid negative feedback? This brings me back to the underlying importance of sales and promotions to these influencers. Although the influencers were intentionally striving to convey trustworthiness through a variety of strategies, they also failed to be transparent at times, particularly in their comment sections. This struck me as quite contradictory from the stated purpose that these parenting influencers regularly repeated.

Another thing I noticed was that although the influencers came across as experts and as relatable to their parent audiences, there is also an entire production team behind the scenes for influencers of the size that I studied in my netnography. At times, the influencers would mention someone on their team, or mention working with a team of people to create some content for their audiences. However, it is not clearly laid out who a follower is interacting with when they engage with the parent influencer. For example, when a follower sends a message or writes a comment and receives a reply, is the follower hearing from a team member or the influencer? Does it matter? Perhaps not the production element of content creation, but I found myself wondering if the influencers worked with other professionals or experts in the field to respond to

questions from followers, for example. It would make a difference to me to know whether a question I might hypothetically ask about parenting and received a response to would be answered by a junior social media manager, the influencer, or someone else working behind the scenes with the influencer who also has parenting expertise. Although the influencers did a good job of appearing relatable, genuine and authentic, I found myself increasingly questioning the situation behind the scenes.

4.5.5 Concluding Comments

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of my netnographic process, which I employed conducted to explore the strategies employed by parenting influencers to establish trustworthiness in their online platforms. Guided by Sztompka's (1999) framework of trustworthiness, I organized themes that arose from my netnography across his three main dimensions of trustworthiness: performance, reputation, and appearance. Under the performance dimension, I discussed education and credentials and how influencers strategically use their educational background and professional credentials to signal expertise and reliability in offering parenting advice. I also discussed the theme of commitment and consistency, focusing on how influencers' ongoing dedication and consistent messaging contribute to trustworthiness. Within the reputation dimension, I discussed the theme of peer-to-peer cross-promotion among influencers, exploring how parent influencers collaborate with their peers to mutually endorse and validate each other's content, thereby enhancing their collective credibility and trustworthiness. Additionally, I outline how testimonials, both celebrity endorsements and testimonials from satisfied followers contribute to enhancing influencer reputations. Finally, I discuss themes related to appearance, include relatability (the "I'm just like you" factor), the connection of physical appearance to relatability, and authenticity. I explain how I see these

themes denote strategies that influencers use to cultivate a trustworthy appearance among their followers. By structuring my findings around Sztompka's framework of trustworthiness, I've shown how it can be used to explore the concept in a social media environment. This also allowed me to take the very open and ambiguous task of analyzing my netnographic material and experience and add a little bit of structure around it to help bring out key insights related to the strategies used by parenting influencers to contribute to being seen as trustworthy.

In the next and final chapter, I will further summarize the findings of this study and discuss the potential significance in advancing understanding of strategies used by influencers to influence trustworthiness. I will also discuss the usefulness of netnography as a method for social media research, as well as discuss the limitations of the study and potential areas of focus for future research.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I set out to better understand the strategies used by parenting influencers to communicate trustworthiness. To answer my research question, I used netnography to study parenting influencers on social media. I focused on Instagram, and selected six parenting influencers to follow. I followed these influencers for just over one month, taking detailed field notes as I focused on the content they created, what information they shared, and how they shared it. I also observed how they interacted on their pages. I ended my netnography when I reached a point of theoretical saturation; that is, when I realized that I was not making any new observations. I then analyzed the netnographic experience and my field notes using a deductive and inductive approach to thematic analysis. I surfaced key themes from the material, and was able to fit these themes within Sztompka's (1999) framework of trustworthiness. In the previous chapter, I discussed these themes, using examples to support my assertions, and explored how the key themes were connected to trustworthiness through the lens of Sztompka's framework. In this concluding chapter, I discuss the meaning of this study as a whole and explore its potential contributions to the existing literature. I also discuss the limitations of my research and directions for future research.

5.2 Outcome of the Study

My research question asked how social media parenting influencers communicate with their parent audiences. Specifically, I was interested in whether I could identify elements related to Sztompka's (1999) framework of trustworthiness in the ways that parent influencers communicated, or in the strategies that they used to communicate with on Instagram. Based on the findings that I discuss in Chapter 4, I suggest that this study has helped show how some

parenting influencers communicate with their parent audiences on social media, and that it is possible to connect the strategies used by parent influencers to Sztompka's three dimensions of trustworthiness: performance, reputation, and appearance. Ultimately, I suggest that this adds an important nuance to our understanding of the complex concept of trustworthiness, within the complicated domain of social media, in the relatively unstudied context of parent influencers.

5.2.1 Performance Trust Factor - Education & Credentials

In my exploration of how parenting influencers establish trustworthiness, I found that all the influencers in my study prominently leveraged their educational achievements and credentials. This strategy aligns with a significant body of academic literature on influencer trust and credibility. Drawing from Sztompka's (1999) framework, it is evident that education and credentials play a pivotal role in the performance dimension of trustworthiness. Freberg et al. (2011), in their study on the personalities of influencers, showed that influencers who highlight their professional backgrounds and qualifications are perceived as more credible and trustworthy. Similarly, De Veirman et al., (2017) highlight that perceived expertise, often communicated through formal credentials, enhances the influencer's ability to impact their audience's attitudes and behaviors. That the influencers I studied focused on education and credentials to communicate their successful performance as a dimension of establishing trustworthiness is not surprising, but it is still a useful insight for this particular context.

5.2.2 Performance Trust Factor - Commitment & Consistency

I also noticed the theme of commitment and consistency in how parenting influencers communicated. This is consistent with findings from researchers like Kim and Kim (2021) who discuss the concept of building relational trust through consistent and reliable content from

influencers which contributes significantly to audience trust. Among my influencers, I found that their dedication to maintaining their pages and their regular posting were clear features of how they communicated online. This aligns with existing theories and research on digital influence and credibility. According to the work of Kim & Ko (2012) Kim and Ko (2012), a strong and ongoing commitment to content creation fosters a sense of reliability and dedication, which enhances the credibility of influencers. By regularly and consistently updating their pages and engaging with their audience, influencers demonstrate their dedication to providing value and maintaining a consistent presence, which in turn builds trust.

5.2.3 Reputation Trust Factor - Cross-Promotion & Peer-to-Peer Support

In relation to reputation, I noticed that all the parent influencers under study frequently engage in cross-promotion as a pivotal strategy for developing and enhancing their reputations. As cross-promotion involves influencers endorsing one another, it creates a network of credibility that serves to boost the reputation of those within the parent influencer community. This is a strategy that is well-established in the literature as Smith (2021) argues that cross-promotion plays a critical role in expanding trust networks. According to Smith (2021), influencers are able to leverage on each other's credibility through endorsing one another to create a more expansive and interconnected trust framework (Smith, 2021). Essentially, by promoting one another, influencers draw on each other's pre-existing reputations, thereby enhancing their own credibility through associations. Lee et al., (2021) further discuss the benefits of cross-promotion by highlighting its impact on audience perception. They assert that collaborative endorsements, or the peer-to-peer support between influencers lead to a heightened sense of reliability and trust among their respective audiences (Lee et al., 2021). This assertion was supported by the increased audience engagement I observed during cross-promotional

activities. Again, while the literature suggests that cross-promotion is important, it is useful to further confirm that this remains an important reputational element in the specific context of parenting influencers.

5.2.4 Reputation Trust Factor – Testimonials

Testimonials from both celebrities and regular followers was another important theme that I noted from my netnography. The literature suggests that like cross-promotion, testimonials are important, and Smith (2021) highlights the foundational role of testimonials in building trust, noting that testimonials act as social proof, offering third-party validation of an influencer's credibility and reliability (Smith, 2021). In my study, I observed that testimonials from satisfied followers and well-known celebrities seemed to increase engagement. I suggest that these types of endorsements allow influencers to further amplify their reputation, leading to stronger trustworthiness among their audience or followers. Again, while this is in line with the existing literature, it is useful to understand the testimonials remain important in the specific parent influencer sphere.

5.2.5 Appearance Trust Factor – Relatability (I'm Just like you Factor)

In connection with Sztompka's appearance dimension, one of the themes I surfaced was relatability. I suggest that relatability is a strategy used by parenting influencers that allows them to emphasize their similarity to their followers, thereby creating a more personal connection with their audiences. According to Ryu & Han (2021), familiarity is essential in influencer world in communicating trust. That is, if an influencer shows familiarity, consumers, in this case followers, are able to relate with them. Hence, relatability allows influencers to connect with their audience on a personal level, fostering a sense of shared experience and mutual understanding. My analysis supports this view, as I observed that influencers who share personal

anecdotes and everyday challenges seemed to receive more engagement from their audiences. I also felt myself as a member of the community during my netnographic process being drawn in by content that emphasized the relatability of the influencers. By presenting themselves being a parent just like me, who faces similar issues and experiences, they are able to appear more trustworthy. Lee and Johnson (2022) further elaborate on this idea by emphasizing the impact of perceived similarity. They argue that when influencers engage in self-disclosure, that is “revealing personal information to others” (p.33), it contributes to them successfully portraying themselves as similar to their audience, they enhance their perceived credibility and trustworthiness, leading to a positive impact of increased engagement and loyalty. By focusing on appearing relatable, I suggest that these parent influencers employ an important strategy of trustworthiness.

5.2.6 Appearance Trust Factor – Physical Appearance

I also connect the theme of physical appearance with relatability. I suggest that physical appearance – specifically, the ways that the parent influencers choose to dress and present themselves physically in different contexts, is connected to how they present themselves as relatable. This observation resonates with the concept of "source attractiveness," a well-established principle in communication theory. According to source attractiveness theory, physical appearance can enhance an individual's persuasiveness and credibility (Hovland et al., 1953). In the context of parent influencers, an appealing or relatable appearance can contribute to a more favorable perception by the audience, facilitating greater engagement and trust. In my netnography, I noticed that parent influencers present themselves in both professional (polished) and relatable (unpolished) manners. These two presentations seemed to be connected with their identity as experts and their identity as relatable parents who are just like you tend to foster

stronger connections with their followers. This aligns with researchers findings on social media influencers, where appearance, alongside personality and authenticity, was identified as a crucial factor in maintaining audience engagement (Audrezet et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022b; Wellman et al., 2020). They argue that an influencer's appearance can significantly influence their perceived credibility and likability, which in turn affects their ability to engage effectively with their audience. Finally, the importance of physical appearance can be linked to the broader concept of "visual rhetoric." Visual rhetoric examines how images and physical presentation communicate messages and values (Rose, 2016). For parent influencers, visual presentation—including style, grooming, and overall appearance—can convey messages about their lifestyle, values, and parenting practices, and importantly, their identity. This can create a sense of alignment or aspirational connection with their audience, further enhancing engagement.

5.2.7 Appearance Trust Factor – Authenticity

Finally, I suggest that authenticity is a theme that emerged from my netnography. By being authentic to a self that isn't necessarily trying to relate as a parent, the parent influencers find ways to differentiate themselves from others. This aligns with the notion of "content novelty," which suggests that audiences are drawn to fresh and unique content that stands out from the mundane (Berger & Milkman, 2012). In my study, parent influencers seemed to primarily differentiate themselves not on their expert-related content, but rather through presenting a unique authentic self. By communicating unvarnished emotions, personal information, and sharing content that isn't necessarily sanitized and perfect, the parent influencers were all able to appear authentic in their approach, particularly through stories. I suggest that the strategy of authenticity to differentiate oneself and contribute to trustworthiness is an important outcome of my study.

5.3 Contributions

My study on the strategies used by parent influencers to communicate with their audiences makes a unique contribution to the communication studies field by enriching the existing body of knowledge with specific insights into the dynamics of trustworthiness in the parent influencer space. I suggest that using Sztompka's framework as a structure for the study allows for an understanding of how this definition of trustworthiness may be useful for understanding how to communicate trustworthiness in social media in the future. As Sztompka's framework has not been studied in connection with social media, it is useful to see that his dimensions of performance, reputation, and appearance are useful for categorizing key themes related to trustworthiness. Although there are many other opportunities to further explore the usefulness of this framework in the realm of social media and influencer communication, this study represents a first step to try to understand strategies for trustworthy communication through this particular frame. Ultimately, this study, while limited in scope, allows for a more nuanced understanding of how some parenting influencers communicating about children's social and emotional health employ strategies to establish trustworthiness on social media. This population of influencers is somewhat understudied, considering that more and more millennial-aged adults are becoming parents and turning to social media for parenting information. As such, I suggest it is important to understand the strategies that influencers employ to effectively establish trust. Part of the importance of this connects with the need for more evidence-based and reliable information to be communicated through social media channels. It is possible that by understanding how successful influencers build trustworthiness using specific strategies across Sztompka's three key dimensions, agencies that are committed to providing useful and evidence-based information can better understand how to establish themselves as credible sources for information-seeking audiences on social media.

5.3.2 Methodological Contribution

In addition to the potential contributions mentioned above, I also suggest that this study contributes to the relatively minimal literature that makes use of netnography for social media research. While there have been some studies that employ netnography to explore dynamics on sites like Reddit and tripadvisor, there is little netnographic research that has been conducted on Instagram. Additionally, netnography has often been used to understand consumer behaviour; by employing netnography to better understand communication behaviour (specifically of parent influencers) I suggest that I demonstrate a potential approach for future research that seeks to study social media communities and niches. Part of my contribution lies in the fact that netnography is a novel approach to study Instagram, and specifically to study parenting influencers on this platform. I suggest that by utilizing netnography, I was able to leverage an immersive and contextually rich approach to gather material from this digital environment.

5.3.3 Practical Contribution

Additionally, I suggest that my research offers practical insights that can be applied by parent influencers looking to become more successful online. By focusing communicating education and credentials, consistent posting and commitment to content creation, by engaging in cross-promotions, soliciting testimonials, by striving to be relatable to one's audience, by using physical appearance to communicate relatability and by using authentic emotion and personal detail to differentiate their content, existing influencers may be able to improve their trustworthiness among their followers. Because these themes fit well under Sztompka's three key dimensions of trustworthiness, focusing on these elements would likely result in increased trustworthiness, thereby increasing the followership and popularity of existing influencers. This

guidance may be valuable for influencers striving to differentiate themselves in a crowded digital landscape and to cultivate a loyal and engaged audience.

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

I acknowledge that my study is approached from an interpretivist perspective, which inherently accepts my own personal biases and influence on the research process, as both a mother and a researcher. This dual role has undoubtedly influenced my interpretations and findings. My focus was specifically on parenting influencers, and the scope of my research was limited to a relatively small group of influencers. All the influencers selected based on the inclusion criteria had similar background especially with regards to their education. Importantly, I observed these influencers' interactions and content without directly questioning them about their trust-building strategies. Given these limitations, I recognize that my findings cannot be broadly generalized across all types of influencers or social media contexts. Rather, it might provide some transferable findings and knowledge that may be applied to other influencers in other niches. The insights derived are specific to the sample of parenting influencers I studied and may not fully capture the complexities of trust-building strategies employed by influencers in other niches or across different platforms.

I believe that future research should consider examining trust-building strategies from the perspective of the influencers themselves. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these strategies are developed and implemented, complementing the observational insights I have provided. By incorporating interviews or surveys with influencers, future studies could explore the motivations behind their trust-building practices and how they perceive the impact of their strategies on audience engagement. Moreover, while there is a

significant body of research on influencers, particularly within the realm of influencer marketing, the focus on parenting influencers has been relatively underexplored. My study's application of netnography and Sztompka's framework of trustworthiness to this niche area represents a novel approach. However, extending this research to include other types of influencers and diverse social media contexts could provide a broader perspective on trust-building dynamics.

Additionally, it would be useful to further explore the value of Sztompka's framework of trustworthiness in the social media setting through additional studies, including studies that evaluate trustworthiness from the audience side, and ask audiences to identify aspects related to performance, reputation and appearance that influence their assessment of trustworthiness.

However, as an exploratory first step at bringing an alternative framework of trustworthiness into an understudied niche of influencers, this study serves a useful purpose and contributes to our understanding of the strategies employed by parent influencers to communicate and build trustworthiness with their audiences on Instagram.

5.5 Concluding Comments

Through this netnographic process, I gained new insights into understanding these select parenting influencer and how they relate with their audience. I observed how the parenting influencers were intentional about their communication with their followers. Every conversation, post, and story was crafted and shared purposefully, and the affordances of the Instagram platform was leveraged to serve the purpose of benefiting their intention. However, as a mother and immigrant from Ghana, West Africa, I did apply most of the parenting advice that these select parenting influencers shared to my own parenting. And, after a month of being embedded in this community, I can pinpoint a few changes in my approach to parenting. I have become a more understanding and present mother. I liken this experience to listening to words of

knowledge from an elder so as to not repeat certain mistakes. It felt like being handed a roadmap from these select influencers; and a consistent reminder that I am in charge of the parenting ship and captain of assisting in their social and emotional development. The key takeaway that still rings in my ear is that as I parent, during both the easy and tough times I must remember that, as drbeckyatgoodinside often says, I am parenting for the long term.

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