Author(s): Kallioharju, Minna; Wilska, Terhi-Anna; Vänskä, Annamari

Title: Mothers' self-representations and representations of childhood on social media

Year: 2023

Version: Published version

Mothers' self-representations and representations of childhood on social media

Minna Kallioharju, Terhi-Anna Wilska and Annamari Vänskä

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to examine mothers' social media accounts that focus on children's fashion. The authors probed children's fashion photo practices as representations of the mothers' extended self and the kind of childhood representations produced by the social media accounts. They also investigated mothers' perceptions of children's privacy when engaging in sharenting – the sharing of information about children or parenting online.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The study is based on 16 semi-structured interviews with Finnish mothers who had Instagram accounts focusing on children's fashion.*

Findings – *Children's fashion photos play a diverse role in mothers' identity work. The photos can be used to express a mother's taste and aesthetic skills, to express values, to fit into peer groups and to store memories of oneself and the children. Through the photos, representations of the prevailing Finnish childhood ideals, such as authenticity, naturalness and playfulness, are reproduced. The mothers perceived the children as part of their extended self and justified sharenting with mother- and child-centered arguments.*

Originality/value – *Through shedding light on the practices of social media fashion photography, this paper provides insights into how commercialism and social media shape cultural expectations for both motherhood and childhood. The paper contributes to previous research on sharenting, extending it to the context of fashion photography.*

Keywords Motherhood, Extended self, Self-representation, Consumption, Childhood, Children's fashion, Children's clothing, Social media, Sharenting, Purchase requests, Online media, Other media and children, Children's fashion

Paper type Research paper

Minna Kallioharju and Terhi-Anna Wilska are both based at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland.
Annamari Vänskä is based at the Department of Design, Aalto University, Helsinki, Finland.

Introduction

This article examines Finnish mothers' investments in children's fashionable clothing and its expressions on social media through children's fashion photos taken by mothers of their own children. We approach practices such as taking, editing and sharing photos as part of mothers' identity work as mothers. Our theoretical perspective is based on the concepts of the extended self (Belk, 1988) and self-representation (Goffman, 1959; Thumim, 2012). Through these practices, we can also probe the kinds of childhood representations (re)produced in the photos. We argue that Instagram accounts focusing on children's clothing are part of a phenomenon called sharenting. This refers to practices of sharing information regarding one's parenting or children on the internet (Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017).

Considering that imagery is a significant part of modern fashion consumption and a site for constructing ideal childhood (Vänskä, 2017, pp. 8-10), we think it is important to extend the scope of consumer research to mothers' fashion images. Purchasing children's clothing and investing in children's appearances have increasingly interested researchers in recent

years (Andersen *et al.*, 2007; Huopalainen and Satama, 2020; McNeill and Graham, 2014; Åberg and Huvila, 2019). Moreover, extensive attention is being paid to the use of social media by mothers, including mommy bloggers and mom influencers (Abidin, 2017; Archer, 2019; Dobson and Jay, 2020; Hunter, 2016; Jorge *et al.*, 2022; Lehto, 2021), as well as to the sharenting phenomenon (Ammari *et al.*, 2015; Autenrieth, 2018; Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017; Holiday *et al.*, 2020; Steinberg, 2017). Previous research has suggested that as the use of the visual social media Instagram continues to increase, there is a need for research on the presence of children in its imagery (Archer, 2019) and also how children's visual representations "influence different spheres of contemporary life" (Dobson and Jay, 2020, p. 74).

For this study, we interviewed Finnish mothers whose Instagram accounts were dedicated to their children's fashion. The focus is on ordinary mothers who keep children's fashion accounts in a nonprofessional way, as opposed to influencers or micro-celebrities for whom maintaining social media accounts can be an established career (Abidin, 2017). Various brand collaborations are popular on Instagram's children's fashion accounts, and 13 of the 16 mothers we interviewed had had at least one clothing collaboration, in which they had received the product(s) or money in exchange for posts. This article sheds light on the practices of fashion photography through which mothers of small children express themselves and their identities. We also investigate the kinds of representations of childhood produced through these pictures and how these representations may reflect prevailing childhood ideals. This study also examines mothers' perceptions of children's privacy in their photography and sharing practices.

Theoretical background

Investing in children's clothing in contemporary motherhood

Mothers can express their aesthetic tastes via children's fashion photos on social media, but investments in a child's appearance, such as on the purchase of branded clothing, also carry meanings that are intertwined with cultural expectations and norms of good motherhood (Andersen *et al.*, 2007; Brusdal and Frønes, 2013; Huopalainen and Satama, 2020; McNeill and Graham, 2014; Åberg and Huvila, 2019). Mothers' purchases of children's clothing can be considered identity work, as illustrated in Belk's (1988) theory of the extended self. People can integrate other persons and non-human others, such as pets, into their extended self, or even treat the pet as a childlike baby (Vänskä, 2014), and when children are part of a parent's identity, mediated consumption of children's clothing can improve the parent's self-esteem (Belk, 1988, pp. 156-157).

The global trend in low-birth countries is that parents are increasingly investing emotionally and financially in children (Gauthier and de Jong, 2021). By investing in children's appearances, parents can show in a visible way that they love and care for their children and thereby experience the pleasure of fulfilling parenting responsibilities (Andersen *et al.*, 2007; McNeill and Graham, 2014).

Previous research has approached the purchase of children's clothing mainly from the perspective of middle-class mothers (Andersen *et al.*, 2007; Huopalainen and Satama, 2020; McNeill and Graham, 2014; Åberg and Huvila, 2019). According to these studies, buying children's clothing is socially mediated and negotiated: mothers consume to a large extent through their children and are aware of the symbolic meanings and cultural coding that children's clothing conveys in their peer group. The concept of mothering capital, which extends the concept of aesthetic capital (Wolf, 1991), describes this resource that mothers can accumulate and manifest through spending on their own and their children's appearance (Åberg and Huvila, 2019). Spending money on children is considered part of mothers' emotional work that can support the transition phase and a role change into motherhood (Kehily, 2014; Martens *et al.*, 2004; Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006).

Self-representation on social media

In the past, mothers of young children gathered in places such as family cafes, where consumer goods, including children's clothing, were showcased (Brusdal and Frønes, 2013). When mothers today share pictures of their children in brand clothes and exchange fashion knowledge on social media they express their extended selves and create self-representations for themselves and their children (Humphreys, 2018; Thumim, 2012). Dress choices are one tool used to achieve the desired self-representation on Instagram (Shumaker *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, the images produce representations of childhood, circulating the symbolic meanings given to it.

Self-presentation refers to the process by which individuals seek to make a certain kind of impression of themselves. These impressions have an impact on how an individual becomes perceived, valued and treated, both in the eyes of others and themselves (Leary and Kowalski, 1990, p. 34). In Goffman's (1959) theatrical metaphor, individuals intentionally or unintentionally perform themselves, and other people are the audience in this performance. This point of view has been used in studies of social media communication. According to van Dijck (2013), social media platforms encourage both unconscious self-expression and conscious self-promotion.

Thumim (2012, p. 6) made a distinction between the concepts of self-representation, presentation of self and performance of self, on the grounds that representation is about mediation of a textual object that has the potential for subsequent engagement. Also noteworthy is Giddens (1991, p. 53) view that an individual's identity requires a continuous narrative biography that the persons construct by placing events and experiences in the narrative of themselves. Social media platforms enable and, generally, encourage users to build a cohesive and chronological online biography (van Dijck, 2013; Belk, 2013). From this point of view, mothers' social media practices can be understood as part of the documentation of family life that has a long history in the form of family photo albums, scrapbooks and baby books (Humphreys, 2018; Rose, 2010). When women are responsible for sharing family representations on social media, this can be understood as a form of domestic work or as affective, emotional or intimate labor (Boris and Parreñas, 2010; Humphreys, 2018; Lehto, 2021; Rose, 2010).

The photos taken by mothers are also related to the (re)production of cultural conceptions of childhood. When mothers take pictures of their children, they not only describe the children as they are but also construct interpretations of desirable childhood. A child not only refers to a physical child but, depending on the situation and the interpreter, but also symbolizes the qualities associated with it, such as happiness, future or burden (Vänskä, 2017 pp. 19-21). Representations are based on shared cultural meanings (Hall, 1997, pp. 1-3), which are not permanent structures. Childhood perceptions are constantly changing and under negotiation (Vänskä, 2017).

Children's fashion photos as part of sharenting

Sharenting is a concept that combines *sharing* and *parenting*. It defines how parents distribute content about themselves as parents through images of their own children. This practice is linked to the idea of the extended self (Belk, 1988) and to parental self-performance (Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017).

Sharing is not a new practice. For example, women's diaries often include narratives about other people, blurring the line between oneself and others (Humphreys, 2018, pp. 47-49). However, the audience has become wider than before, now consisting of those who "follow" the sharer on social media. Parents' use of the internet has highlighted the conflicting interests of children and adults: parents' rights to share information about their lives, which also includes children and children's right to define their own digital footprint. This has brought to the fore the dual role of parents, they have rights to control their children's

upbringing and the rights to free speech, but their role is also to protect the children's privacy (Steinberg, 2017). Scholars have discussed how parents define the boundaries while trying to reconcile their child's right to privacy and their own need to represent themselves as parents on social media (Ammari *et al.*, 2015; Autenrieth, 2018; Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017; Holiday *et al.*, 2020).

Sharenting practices are diverse and based on different motives. They have been examined, among other things, from the perspective of family photography practices (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015) and mommy influencers/family influencers (Abidin, 2017; Archer, 2019; Dobson and Jay, 2020; Hunter, 2016; Jorge *et al.*, 2022). Mommy blogs have become more commercial and professional (Hunter, 2016). Influencers often involve their young children in producing promotional posts, such as reviewing sponsored products or services (Archer, 2019), adopting the concept of childhood and childhood representations for commercial use (Kallio, 2021). When referring to influencers and "ordinary mothers", the line between them is blurred. For some influencer mothers, the primary motive for maintaining a blog is not to earn money (Archer and Harrigan, 2016), and everyday mothers may use social media in connection with their work or business (Archer, 2019). Also, influencers' online behavior can inspire everyday mothers' choices (Archer, 2019) and normalize sharing (Leaver, 2017).

Sharenting can have positive effects, such as peer support and the communality they provide for mothers (Pedersen and Lupton, 2018). From the children's point of view, expanded visual information shared about children increases their vulnerability (Choi and Lewallen, 2018). Sharenting has been considered to involve potential risks related to a child's privacy (Autenrieth, 2018; Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017; Holiday *et al.*, 2020; Steinberg, 2017). Even though parents may be aware of online and social media threats, such as pedophilia and data collection about children (Autenrieth, 2018, p. 222), and they may have adopted a child protection perspective, they may still share photos and information about their children because the child is so essentially a part of their self-presentation as parents (Holiday *et al.*, 2020). It has been seen as problematic that children have limited agency in representations about them and their lives on their parents' social media (Dobson and Jay, 2020), and that small children participate in the promotional posts, even though their understanding and opinions about their exposure to commercial sharenting will be formed in the future (Kallio, 2021).

Based on the theoretical background presented in this chapter, we aim to approach the practices of children's fashion photos on Instagram by asking the following research questions:

RQ1. How do mothers of small children express themselves and their identities through fashion photography practices?

RQ2. What kinds of representations of childhood are produced through these pictures?

RQ3. How do mothers consider children's privacy in their practices of photographing and sharing?

Data and methods

The research data consist of 16 semi-structured thematic interviews we conducted with Finnish mothers who had Instagram accounts, and which focus on children's fashion. These accounts were searched from children's fashion communities "ministylefinland" and "todaysstylesfinland" and through children's clothing-related hashtags, such #ministylefinland, #ministf and #todaysstylesfinland. The choices based on the popularity of those communities and hashtags. Mothers were approached for interviews with a private message.

Finnish mothers can be regarded as active users of social media. In 2020, half of Finnish women aged 35–44 and 65% of women aged 25–34 had used Instagram in the past three

months (OSF, 2020) Instagram's community, "ministylefinland," which defines itself as a "community for those interested in children's fashion," has 16,400 followers (Instagram, 2022, February 18).
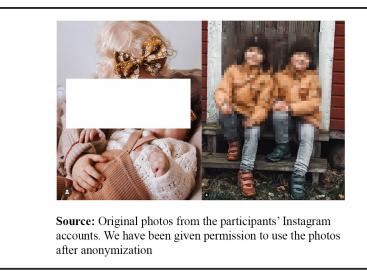
The mothers we interviewed were 20 to 39 years old. Their educational backgrounds and household incomes varied, and the interviewees included working mothers, students and mothers on parental leave. The background information is presented in Table 1. Most interviewees had had an Instagram account for several years. The interviews lasted approximately 1 h (52 min to 1 h 12 min). The interviews were conducted between December 2020 and April 2021. The prevailing COVID-19 pandemic caused restrictions, and therefore, interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom.

The traditional qualitative interview method has already proven to be a workable method for examining social media practices, such as taking, making, viewing and sharing images (Hand, 2016). In the interviews, we used photos from the participants' Instagram accounts to maintain and deepen the discussion. The participants were asked to select three photos for the interview. Some of the mothers sent these in advance by responding to messages, some brought the pictures they had chosen to the interview, and a few had not been able to choose any pictures. In these cases, the pictures were selected during the discussion. In most cases, these were photos of a child or children, a few images also included a mother with children, and a few images contained only clothing, without a person. Examples of photos is presented in Figure 1. The main benefit of the photos was that they led discussions and sparked lots of reflection among mothers, but they also deepened the interviewer's understanding of this visual genre. The interviews were documented as video recordings. When no new themes seemed to emerge in the interviews, we concluded that the interviews had reached saturation.

The interviews were transcribed into text and anonymized. Inductive content analysis, commonly used in qualitative studies, was used. The method uses an abstraction process to reduce and group data to answer the research questions (Kyngäs, 2020). The manually implemented analysis was based on a close and systematic reading of the material. We went through the material and identified themes that emerge from it. We coded and formed subcategories from the themes. In the next phase, data was categorized as follows: photo-planning, photography of children, child privacy, children's clothing, editing process and sharing images. We further grouped these into four main categories: photo production,

Table 1	Participants' background information		
Participant	Age	Education	Household income €/Year
P1	25	Secondary education	60,000–79,999
P2	34	Masters	80,000–100,000
P3	26	Secondary education	20,000–39,999
P4	28	Bachelors	80,000–100,000
P5	29	Secondary education	80,000–100,000
P6	32	Bachelors	60,000–79 999
P7	34	Masters	80,000–100,000
P8	27	Student (Bachelors)	–
P9	35	Secondary education	20,000–39,999
P10	31	Secondary education	60,000–79,999
P11	28	Bachelor	60,000–79,999
P12	28	Bachelors	40,000–59,999
P13	31	Bachelors	80,000–100,000
P14	26	Secondary education	60,000–79,999
P15	37	Masters	20,000–39,999
P16	36	Lower secondary education	40,000–59,999

Source: Author's own work

Figure 1 Examples of mothers' children's fashion photos

Source: Original photos from the participants' Instagram accounts. We have been given permission to use the photos after anonymization

childhood representations, everyday documentation and child privacy. The main categories served as a basis for reporting the results of content analysis. In reporting, we provide quotes from the interviews, which we translated from Finnish to English.

Results

Constructed and edited beautiful moments from everyday life

Mothers constructed self-representations by publishing only thoroughly considered images. Based on the interviews, fashion photos of children captured selected beautiful moments of everyday life that were unplanned, half-staged or completely pre-arranged and constructed.

Based on the interviews, mothers spend various amounts of time preparing the photo shoots. This could include, for example, choosing clothes, dressing the child(ren), brushing and styling the children's hair, selecting and preparing the scene and finishing the layout with props. One mother talked about a picture of her baby sleeping in a basket, the photo also shows the mother's hand holding a cup of coffee. Laughing, the mother revealed that the coffee was already cold, but viewers would not know it. She said that the child was indeed having a nap but that certain things had been done for the picture:

> For example, I had planned to dress [the baby] with certain types of clothes on before daytime naps, and I had put some stuff in the basket so that he fell asleep with them. I know a lot of people might, so to speak, stage babies when they're sleeping, but I like that the baby really falls asleep with those things, and then I take the photo, so it's kind of a real moment, it's extremely important to me, that it's not like staged [...] that photo. (P13)

The interviews revealed that the children's fashion photos often illustrate everyday life, but the scene is staged and constructed. As has been noted, selected representations show the preferred self-image that reflects not only reality but also ideals and aspirations (Humphreys, 2018, p. 70; Marwick, 2013). In line with Goffman's (1959, p. 44) theory, they are performances presented to others, while a performance taken too far is perceived as fake. That is why mothers wanted the photos to be authentic, to some extent, or at least to look like it.

Some interviewees also stressed that they avoided too much planning and preferred taking pictures spontaneously. The mothers felt that excessive planning with children was pointless, as plans rarely come true. For some, spontaneous photography was generally more pleasant.

However, there were also inconsistencies in the expression of unplannedness. For example, a mother who said that "[photoshoot] is based on a spur-of-the-moment inspiration which I don't really plan", continued later:

> Although these shooting ideas usually come on the spur of the moment, these images are, however, all thought out. These aren't just, how would I say, everyday snaps [laughs], but I might have changed the kids' clothes or something [. . .] (P3).

Whether the mothers preferred planning or not in their photographic practices, they said that they take a lot of photos and then choose the material to share, as the following mother, who favors spontaneity, said:

> There will be a lot of snaps, from which I will then select the best ones [. . .], that is, maybe they are just snapshots, but then, the best ones will be selected. (P10)

The mothers said that they had always edited the images before publishing. Photo-editing tools with "filters" and "presets" were used for several purposes: to enhance the aesthetics of the image, to ensure coherence of feed, and to make the images consistent with Instagram's prevailing visual styles. Despite the norm of editing, the aim was to preserve naturalness and truthfulness and to avoid an overedited impression. Thus, our findings are in line with previous research in which the quest for authenticity in social media self-presentation has been well documented (Marwick, 2013; Abidin, 2017; Warfield, 2017).

The pursuit of coherence points out how Instagram is a tool to manifest the extended self, and to mediate a continuous visual narrative about the self (Belk, 2013). However, it also sheds light on the social aspects of practices. Although some mothers stressed that Instagram is a form of visual self-expression for them, and that individuality is important, the pursuit of social communication and social cohesion was also evident. According to the mothers, the prevailing Instagram style in the children's fashion genre, described by some interviewees as a "boho vintage style" (P2, P6, P11), emphasizes warm colors, intense ambience and authenticity. High-quality photos that fit in the style of children's fashion genre are more likely to get the attention of others, and they can also be "re-posted" by either other mothers, children's clothing communities or children's clothing brands. All of these represent visible social recognition to the mother, and thereby increase her online "mothering capital" (Åberg and Huvila, 2019).

Representations of natural childhood

The mothers' stories demonstrate how the children's fashion photos taken by the mothers used the same notions of childhood innocence, authenticity and naturalness that have traditionally been utilized in commercial advertising images (Vänskä, 2017). For example, in the following, the child and the dog represent naturalness and unplannedness, and thus the truthfulness of the picture:

> Because a dog can't be, in a way, forced into anything, and a baby can't be forced into anything, this is, in a way, a picture of the real moment. But everything around them is styled. (P13)

The mothers preferred to take photos when the children were engrossed in their actions. They said that they get more natural-looking pictures when the child does not notice the camera. Images in which children posed for the camera were avoided, especially in pictures of older children. Portraying a child in a way that they do not seem to be aware of the presence of the camera has been used in fashion advertising to create an impression of innocence (Vänskä, 2017, pp. 29-31). In family photography traditions, posing has also been referred to as artificial, while the "natural look" presents the child as "real" (Rose, 2010, p. 55).

The mothers also said that the effort had been to capture children's genuine feelings and emotions in pictures. This can emphasize the authenticity, spontaneity and innocence of children:

> It's usually that kids are doing something meaningful to them, or looking at something, or looking in some direction, seeing something interesting, and so, if you get a picture, then, at the right time, you get them. (P6)

The photos also use the discourse of a playing child. One of the interviewees said about the outdoor photo that her intention was to take "good mood winter pictures" and simultaneously show the brand of outerwear they were using:

> I've asked him to sit on that snowbank and I've thrown some snow on him [...], the idea was to create the impression like he's been busy playing, and so he has been, actually, for he has red cheeks, and also, the idea was to show that even though there are branded children's clothes, they are in completely normal use. (P15)

In Finland, it has historically been thought that children's clothing should not be too fashionable, but rather "let a child be a child" (Anttila, 2004; Roivainen, 2016). In particular, outerwear has been advertised by emphasizing its practicality and positive impact on children's health (Roivainen, 2016). Simultaneously, however, branded children's clothing and expensive outdoor wear has become a status symbol expressing parental capital (Brusdal and Frønes, 2013; Huopalainen and Satama, 2020; Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006; Roivainen, 2016; Åberg and Huvila, 2019). In this light, through the image of winter clothing, the mother can express not only her taste preferences but also many positive attributes associated with motherhood, such as her practicality and consideration of the child's needs. Furthermore, she can communicate her understanding of ideal Finnish childhood which stresses the child as active and exploring with a close connection to the environment. Pictures of well-dressed children with red cheeks indicate a healthy, playful childhood – the norm of active Finnish childhood.

Almost all interviewees described their children's styles as neutral and natural. The mothers said they preferred natural materials, such as cotton, linen and wool, as well as colors inspired by nature i.e. materials which are ingredients in the construction of natural childhood. Nature was also manifested in the other elements with which the mothers constructed the photos. Many of the photos we viewed during the interviews were taken outdoors – in a park covered with white snow or autumn leaves, or at the edge of a flower meadow or grain field – or natural elements such as flowers, dried flowers or pussy willow branches were used as props, underlining the aspiration of authenticity and naturalness.

The mothers gave practical reasons to favor outdoor photography, such as better light, easier to find neutral backgrounds and children behaving better when they got to play freely. However, nature was also used to create ambiance, and it was frequently one of the constructed elements of the photo. The location was often preselected and traveled to by car and may have included a change of clothes. Nature could also be emphasized by instructing the child to perform in a certain way. A mother described the shooting of the image of a child in a dress and cardigan pictured in an autumn landscape:

> I told her that mom wanted something like that, that you would perform here like a flying butterfly or a soaring bird, you can present as if you were balancing a flight [demonstrates with her hands], so that you would look as if you were leaving [...] and so I gave her the vision that she could fly, and I was really pleased with this picture. (P15)

In parental consumption practices, commercialism can be combined with caring and love (Brusdal and Frønes, 2013), and natural fashion can be one path to make this happen. Nature fits in with the idea of an authentic childhood (Vänskä, 2017) and for parents of young children, the purchase of natural products can be a safe consumption strategy, as natural products are associated with properties such as purity, familiarity and safety

(Andersen and Holm, 2018). Represented through and with designer clothing, nature can symbolize safe childhood and caring parenting.

Like a visual diary or a baby book

The interviewed mothers also used their Instagram accounts to store memories, confirming the perception of Instagram as a virtual diary, and as documentation of family life (Humphreys, 2018; Rose, 2010). In addition to the pictures, some mothers said that they wrote about everyday events in the captions. A few said that they preferred to use Instagram's Story feature, which allows users to post photos or videos that appear for a short time and disappear automatically to share everyday life. These stories will remain in the user's archive so that mothers can return to them later. It was also important for the mothers that the events were presented in chronological order, and, for example, that old photos were not published afterwards.

Although the mothers were aware that the best pieces of everyday life had been captured in the pictures, they also perceived that they had saved memories for themselves and the children:

> We often look at pictures together, they [child] really like to look at photos and videos [...] and remember what was done in it [...] [...] and so we remember those nice moments that came along. (P8)

In children's birthday photos, special attention has often been paid to planning pictures and choosing children's clothing. Several interviewees said that they took a photo each month during the first year of the baby's life with a card showing the age of the baby, and often added other props – for example, as many flowers or pinecones as the child age is in months. Clothing can emphasize the uniqueness of the moment and the significance of the photograph:

> That, for just these monthly photos, so I'm choosing a couple of the favorite outfits that are in use at the time that I want to use for posting [...] and then I avoid the same outfit appearing very much in any of the other photos. (P12)

Thus, in the practices of children's fashion photos on social media, there are many of the same elements found in the tradition of family photography, including capturing the growth of children, creating memories and looking at photos together, especially with children, and by so doing family togetherness (Rose, 2010, pp. 42-44). Carefully constructed photos also serve as evidence of dedicated and devoted parenting, which can strengthen the mother's parenting identity (Humphreys, 2018, pp. 101-102).

Representations of mother and child

In previous research, parents raised three types of concerns regarding sharenting: that pictures may be accessed and misused by strangers, potential commercial misuse of the photos and concern about the biographical footprint parents construct of their children (Autenrieth, 2018). The same concerns about sharenting in general were raised in our interviews, but the mothers felt predominantly that because the postings about children's clothing and lifestyle are light, beautiful and present children positively, sharing them would not be harmful to children. We also found two types of arguments by which mothers explained and justified their sharenting, which we call mother-centered and child-centered arguments.

In the mother-centered arguments, the child was seen as an integral part of the mother's daily life, thus justifying the photography:

> But then, is it a big nuisance if you share beautiful pictures of children [...] because after all, they're part of our lives, they're our family (laughs). (P1)

Such mothers' arguments as this excerpt clearly indicate that while posting pictures of their children, mothers present their extended selves (Belk, 1988, 2013; Humphreys, 2018, p. 70). Previous studies have also indicated that the role of children in sharenting posts is often to support parents' self-representation (Holiday et al., 2020). The mother-centered arguments were also that sharenting provides support for parenting by enabling peer support among mothers. Furthermore, the mothers argued that pictures of children and other personal content engage people, and the posts get more likes, comments and shares.

The child-centered arguments emphasized the child orientation of the practices. The mothers argued, for example, that photography was a leisure activity that the children enjoy. The children were used to the mother taking pictures of them; they liked to be photographed, and they sometimes asked for their pictures to be taken:

> Especially the smaller one likes it, and they have started asking me to take photos of them sometimes (H10).

> Sometimes they ask that mom take a picture of this, or that they want a picture taken of this, that yes, I'll do this on their terms. (P4)

The mothers also emphasized that they wanted to make photographing comfortable for the children, and if the child was not in the right mood, the pictures were not taken.

Justifying sharing on the basis that photography practices are child-centered and children like photography can be problematic if the consequences of sharing are not adequately addressed. Children get used to photography, if it is a part of everyday life, but parents make decisions about sharing photos on social media, of which small children have a limited understanding (Kallio, 2021). Children's opportunities to influence self-presentation are limited (Choi and Lewallen, 2018; Dobson and Jay, 2020; Kallio, 2021) and for example in adolescence children may find the content shared by their parents embarrassing (Verswijvel, et al., 2019).

Mothers are usually responsible for purchasing children's clothing and making clothing choices on behalf of children in everyday life. Thus, the style of the mothers is represented in the photos. The style does not necessarily reflect the child's preferences. One mother said about her natural children's clothing style, which pleases the mother and brings social benefits:

> This is the style that is popular now. And the style with which you can get collaborations and stuff like that [...] [...] I also like this style and it pleases my aesthetic eye, but I know that the child would like to be able to wear those playful clothes [...] (P2).

One of the interviewees, a mother of two (P11), was also critical of representing children's clothing styles on Instagram. She said that she considered it "a little wrong," especially in the case of an older child, to portray the child dressed in clothes chosen by the mother when the child already had their own clothing taste. She continued that she did not want to portray the child in outfits chosen by the child either because it felt too personal to share it on social media. Thus, she mostly shared pictures of the younger child, who, according to her mother, did not yet have opinions about their clothes. This indicates the mother's aim to protect her child's privacy in a world where everyday life increasingly digitalizes.

A few mothers also raised other arguments that differed from the general view, being more critical of sharenting. These mothers said they avoided posting pictures that showed the child's face to hide the child's identity. Photography and posting practices that aim to present children as less identifiable on social media are called anti-sharenting (Autenrieth, 2018). In this study, anti-sharenting was done for the privacy of the child. Further, one mother said she avoided posting pictures showing the child's face for religious reasons. In

anti-sharenting postings, the mothers said they sought to highlight elements such as clothing details to make the photos look interesting.

The mothers presented unified views on the kinds of images that they did not want to share, for example, the child's nudity, the child's unwanted behavior or sibling fights or any pictures that the child might be ashamed of later. Curating the content of the photographs was done to protect the child's privacy, but photos in which the child is well dressed and beautifully portrayed are evidence of caring and loving parenting as well (Humphreys, 2018, pp. 101-102). Most importantly, they participate in the creation and circulation of ideal childhood devoid of all unpleasant issues. This also underlines the constructedness of childhood in general and of natural childhood specifically. It also highlights mediatization (Couldry and Hepp, 2013) of childhood: how the digital media, in this case Instagram, affects how childhood can be portrayed.

Conclusions and discussion

In this article, we examined children's fashion photo practices among mothers who are children's fashion enthusiasts and active social media users. We combined two popular topics – children's fashion and children's presentation on social media – from the perspective of mothers' identities as parents and consumers. The fashion photos reflect the mothers' lifestyles and parenting ideals, but at the same time, they build visual biography for children and reproduce the ideal of authentic childhood permeated by consumption.

In our first research question, we asked how children's fashion photo practices are related to the construction and expression of mothers' extended identity. We found that the curated fashion images represent mothers' ideal perceptions of lifestyle, parenting and childhood, presented to themselves and others. Beautiful photos that receive positive reactions develop mothers' "mothering capital" (Åberg and Huvila, 2019) and self-promotion (Van Dijck, 2013). Photography practices also intertwine with parenting: photos are taken and viewed with children, interaction with children's clothing communities on social media can support parenting, and mothers use pictures to store memories for themselves and their children. Practices can be seen as domestic work and as affective, emotional or intimate labor (Boris and Parreñas, 2010; Humphreys, 2018; Lehto, 2021; Rose, 2010). We have shown that in the age of social media this work can be intensive. Planning, taking and editing pictures is time consuming. Especially pictures related to family traditions, such as monthly photos taken from a baby's first year and birthday photos, are carefully designed from selecting children's clothing to adding props. Audience engagements, such as views, comments, likes and shares, were found to be rewarding. Based on this, expectations related to self-representation on social media can also cause pressure on mothers.

Photos are a way for mothers to express themselves, but as a byproduct, photos also create representations of childhood. Our second research question was what these representations are like. Although children's fashion photos are part of commercial-based sharenting, childhood is portrayed in the photos as authentic, natural, playful, spontaneous and noncommercial, indicating symbolic aspects intertwined with parental consumption (Andersen and Holm, 2018; Brusdal and Frønes, 2013; Kehily, 2014; Martens *et al.*, 2004). Emphasizing naturalness in children's clothing and fashion, photography can be a way to bridge the gap between good childhood and materialism. Naturalness can also support mothers' efforts to present their selves as authentic on social media (Marwick, 2013; Abidin, 2017; Warfield, 2017). Our analyses support the notion that visual representations can be transferred from one media to another (Choi and Lewallen, 2018), as mothers' children's fashion photos use the same notions of childhood that have appeared in fashion advertising and share common features with family photography. What childhood performances have in common, regardless of the media, is the dominating role of adults who define how childhood is portrayed and what a "real" or "authentic" child looks like.

The mothers' perceptions of their children's privacy in the fashion photo practices formed our third research question. Social media representations visually follow earlier practices of picturing children. Simultaneously, they raise novel questions about children's right to privacy in digital environments. For example, questions of photographs creating children a data shadow also emerge. According to a previous study, adolescents were concerned about the long-term consequences of the content their parents share of them, and they did not regard as appropriate to share embarrassing or too personal or intimate information (Ouvrein and Verswijvel, 2019). Although there are no studies about small children, the mothers in this study expressed similar concerns as they wanted to share beautiful and representative pictures of their children. However, adults and children may have different interpretations of what kind of content is suitable for sharing. In this study, mothers' perceptions of the connection between children's clothes and children's personal information varied. One mother said that she felt uncomfortable sharing pictures of her older child, because the child's clothing communicates their personality. And some mothers used children's clothes to implement "anti-sharenting" in their photos. We don't know yet how small children who have grown with social media will experience the fashion posts shared about them when they grow up: whether they perceive the photos as positive self-branding or as too intimate or commercially motivated content. A longitudinal study would be needed to know more about this.

As all research, our research, too has some limitations. While we consider the interviews a workable method of gathering information about mothers' children's clothing photo practices, the method should also be viewed critically, as the collected data disclose more about the interviewees' self-reflections than directly about the practices (Hand, 2016). In addition, the participants were all children's fashion enthusiasts and active social media users, which limits the diversity of the participants. This article did not examine the resources required to engage in children's fashion photography, but that is an important viewpoint for further research. In addition, comparative research on the consumer behavior of mothers who share their children's clothing style on social media versus those who do not, is needed to reveal the full impact of these practices on motherhood. Also, the effects of brand collaborations on mothers' self-presentation and children's privacy are important topics for future studies.

The implications of our research include raising awareness of the ways social media photography practices increase appearance-oriented and materialistic culture. The idealized pictures of children on social media may create norms and definitions of "good parenting" and thereby generate social pressures to other parents. The proliferation of visual social media can affect the spending habits and affect the leisure activities of families. Parents should be aware that adoption of photography and sharenting practices as part of everyday life normalizes these practices for their children. A previous study has shown that adolescents have more positive attitudes toward sharenting if they have more prior experience with it (Verswijvel, et al., 2019). Children's clothing brands that interact and collaborate with mothers on social media should consider the ethical aspects of fashion photos in terms of children's privacy.

References

Åberg, E. and Huvila, J. (2019), "Hip children, good mothers – children's clothing as capital investment?", *Young Consumers*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 153-166.

Abidin, C. (2017), "Familygoals: family influencers, calibrated amateurism, and justifying young digital labor", *Social Media + Society*, Vol. 3 No. 2.

Andersen, S.S. and Holm, L. (2018), "Naturalness as a safe haven: parental consumption practices and the management of risk", *Young Consumers*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 296-309.

Andersen, L.P., Sorensen, E. and Kjaer, M.B. (2007), "Not too conspicuous, mothers' consumption of baby clothing", *European Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 8, pp. 94-98.

Anttila, A. (Ed.) (2004), *Lapsuuden Muuttuva Maisema: Puheenvuoroja Kulutuskulttuurin Seksualisoinnin Vaikutuksista*, Stakes, Helsinki.

Ammari, T., Kumar, P., Lampe, C. and Schoenebeck, S. (2015), "Managing children's online identities: how parents decide what to disclose about their children online", paper presented at the Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Seoul.

Archer, C. (2019), "How influencer 'mumpreneur' bloggers and 'everyday' mums frame presenting their children online", *Media International Australia*, Vol. 170 No. 1, pp. 47-56.

Archer, C. and Harrigan, P. (2016), "Prosumers with passion: learning what motivates bloggers as digital influencer stakeholders", *PRism*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 1-14.

Autenrieth, U. (2018), "Family photography in a network age: anti-sharenting as a reaction to risk assessment and behaviour adaptation", in Mascheroni, G., Ponte, C. and Jorge, A. (Eds), *Digital Parenting: The Challenges for Families in the Digital Age*, The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth & Media at Nordicom, Gothenburg, pp. 219-231.

Belk, R.W. (1988), "Possessions and the extended self", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 139-168.

Belk, R.W. (2013), "Extended self in a digital world", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 40 No. 3, pp. 477-500.

Blum-Ross, A. and Livingstone, S. (2017), "Sharenting," parent blogging, and the boundaries of the digital self", *Popular Communication*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 110-125.

Boris E. and Parreñas R.S. (Eds) (2010), *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Brusdal, R. and Frønes, I. (2013), "The purchase of moral positions: an essay on the markets of concerned parenting", *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, Vol. 37 No. 2, pp. 159-164.

Choi, G.Y. and Lewallen, J. (2018), "Say instagram, kids!": Examining sharenting and children's digital representations on Instagram", *Howard Journal of Communications*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 144-164.

Couldry, N. and Hepp, A. (2013), "Conceptualizing mediatization: contexts, traditions, arguments", *Communication Theory*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 191-202.

Dobson, M. and Jay, J. (2020), "Instagram has well and truly got a hold of me": exploring a parent's representation of her children", *Issues in Educational Research*, Vol. 30 No. 1, p. 58.

Gauthier, A.H. and de Jong, P.W. (2021), "Costly children: the motivations for parental investment in children in a low fertility context", *Genus*, Vol. 77 No. 1.

Giddens, A. (1991), *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Goffman, E. (1959), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Anchor Books, New York, NY.

Hall, S. (1997), "Introduction", Hall S. (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage, London, pp. 1-11.

Hand, M. (2016), "Visuality in social media: researching images, circulations and practices", in Sloan, L. and Quan-Haase, A. (Eds), *The Sage Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, Sage, London, pp. 215-231.

Holiday, S., Norman, M.S. and Densley, R.L. (2020), "Sharenting and the extended self: self-representation in parents' Instagram presentations of their children", *Popular Communication*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 1-15.

Humphreys, L. (2018), *The Qualified Self: Social Media & the Accounting of Everyday Life*, MIT Press, Cambridge, pp. 1-171.

Hunter, A. (2016), "Monetizing the mommy: mommy blogs and the audience commodity", *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 19 No. 9, pp. 1306-1320.

Huopalainen, A. and Satama, S. (2020), "Writing' aesth-ethics on the child's body: developing maternal subjectivities through clothing our children", *Gender, Work & Organization*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 98-116.

Instagram (2022), 18 February, available at: www.instagram.com/ministylefinland/ (accessed 18 February 2022).

Jorge, A., Marôpo, L., Coelho, A.M. and Novello, L. (2022), "Mummy influencers and professional sharenting", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 166-182.

Kallio, S. (2021), "Lasten kaupalliset kasvot: sharenting-ilmiö äitien blogeissa", *Media & Viestintä*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 52-72.

Kehily, M.J. (2014), "For the love of small things: consumerism and the making of maternal identities", *Young Consumers*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 227-238.

Kumar, P. and Schoenebeck, S. (2015), "The modern day baby book: enacting good mothering and stewarding privacy on facebook", *Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing (CSCW '15). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY*, pp. 1302-1312.

Kyngäs, H. (2020), "Inductive content analysis", in Kyngäs, H., Mikkonen, K., Kääriäinen, M. (Eds), *The Application of Content Analysis in Nursing Science Research*, Springer, Cham, doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-30199-6_2.

Leary, M.R. and Kowalski, R.M. (1990), "Impression management: a literature review and two-component model", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 107 No. 1, pp. 34-47.

Leaver, T. (2017), "Intimate surveillance: normalizing parental monitoring and mediation of infants online", *Social Media + Society*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 1-10.

Lehto, M. (2021), *Affective Power of Social Media: Engagements with Networked Parenting Culture*, University of Turku, Turku.

McNeill, L. and Graham, T. (2014), "Mother's choice: an exploration of extended self in infant clothing consumption", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 13 No. 6, pp. 403-410.

Martens, L., Southerton, D. and Scott, S. (2004), "Bringing children (and parents) into the sociology of consumption: towards a theoretical and empirical agenda", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 155-182.

Marwick, A.E. (2013), "Status update: celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age".

Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) (2020), "Use of information and communications technology by individuals [e-publication]", *Liitetaulukko 25. Seuratut Yhteisöpalvelut 2020, %-Osuus Väestöstä*, Statistics Finland, Helsinki, ISSN = 2341-8699. www.stat.fi/til/sutivi/2020/sutivi_2020_2020-11-10_tau_025_fi.html (accessed 23 September 2022).

Ouvrein, G. and Verswijvel, K. (2019), "Sharenting: parental adoration or public humiliation? A focus group study on adolescents' experiences with sharenting against the background of their own impression management", *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 99, pp. 319-327.

Pedersen, S. and Lupton, D. (2018), "What are you feeling right now?' communities of maternal feeling on mumsnet", *Emotion, Space and Society*, Vol. 26, pp. 57-63.

Roivainen, P. (2016), *Puettu Lapsuus: Löytöretkiä Lastenvaatteiden Saarille*, Suomen muinaismuistoyhdistys, Helsinki.

Rose, G. (2010), *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, the Public, and the Politics of Sentiment*, Ashgate, London.

Shumaker, C., Loranger, D. and Dorie, A. (2017), "Dressing for the internet: a study of female self-presentation via dress on Instagram", *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 365-382.

Steinberg, S.B. (2017), "Sharenting: children's privacy in the age of social media", *Emory Law Journal*, Vol. 66 No. 4, pp. 839-884.

Thomsen, T.U. and Sørensen, E.B. (2006), "The first four-wheeled status symbol: pram consumption as a vehicle for the construction of motherhood identity", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 22 Nos 9/10, pp. 907-927.

Thumim, N. (2012), *Self-Representation and Digital Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

van Dijck, J. (2013), "You have one identity': performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn", *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 199-215.

Vänskä, A. (2014), "New kids on the mall: babyfied dogs as fashionable co-consumers", *Young Consumers*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 263-272.

Vänskä, A. (2017), *Fashionable Childhood. Children in Fashion Advertising*, Bloomsbury, New York, NY and London.

Verswijvel, K., Walrave, M., Hardies, K. and Heirman, W. (2019), "Sharenting, is it a good or a bad thing? Understanding how adolescents think and feel about sharenting on social network sites", *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 104, p. 104401.

Warfield, K. (2017), "MirrorCameraRoom: the gendered multi-(in)stabilities of the selfie", *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 77-92.

Wolf, N. (1991), *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, Random House, New York, NY.

About the author

Minna Kallioharju (MA) is a Doctoral student at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy at University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her dissertation focuses on consumption culture of parents of small children, digitalization and social media. Minna Kallioharju is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: kalliomm@student.jyu.fi

Terhi-Anna Wilska (Ph.D) is a Professor of Sociology. She specializes in consumption and lifestyles, financial skills, young people, social media and the digitalization of consumption and economic behavior.

Annamari Vänskä (Ph.D) is a Professor of Fashion Research at Aalto University, Finland. Her research focuses on visual culture, especially on fashion, social media, gender and digitalization.