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Discourse analysis of children's identity on parents' Instagram pages: The case of virtual child labor

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the discourse of children's identity representation on their parents' Instagram pages. Focusing on the concept of virtual child labor and using Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis approach, the research qualitatively examines six Persian-language Instagram accounts that prominently feature children, have a high follower count, include promotional content, and display performative narratives. The findings indicate that children are portrayed as instruments for attracting attention, advertising products, and reinforcing their parents' social status. The linguistic and visual structures of these representations are shaped by discourses such as visual consumerism, apparent agency, performative parenting, and the commodification of childhood. As a result, children's presence in these digital spaces is less a reflection of their lived experiences and agency, and more a reproduction of dominant discourses within the digital economy. These representations highlight a new form of child labor in virtual environments, calling for serious reconsideration in media policy and legal protection of children.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, cyberspace is not only a tool for human communication but also an inseparable part of modern lifestyles, significantly influencing the biological, cultural, and social dimensions of human life. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, have created an environment in which individuals can easily present themselves in the public sphere and reconstruct their identities. One of the most prominent manifestations of such self-representation is the online presence of children on Instagram pages managed by their parents. In recent

years, this phenomenon has become a serious and controversial topic in digital spaces.

Parents who consistently produce Instagram content featuring their children not only publicly display their children's identities but also construct various discourses surrounding how these children are seen and perceived. This practice thrives in an ecosystem where media literacy deficits normalize exploitation—framing child commodification as benign participation while obscuring its psychological risks (Soroori Sarabi et al., 2020). These public displays can result in the formation of a

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commercialized and consumer-oriented image of the child, consciously or unconsciously shaped by the parents. The phenomenon of "Instagram child labor"—a type of media-based exploitation of children—has attracted attention in recent studies. Research shows that these displays may lead to the formation of unrealistic portrayals of childhood identity, which in a society like Iran, where digital media is rapidly expanding, can have significant cultural and social implications (Aghaei & Rezaei, 2019).

This study introduces Instagram child labor as an emerging form of child exploitation in virtual spaces, in which children—through the production of popular content and the attraction of public attention—are effectively placed at risk of exploitation. The phenomenon calls for close analysis in order to unpack its various dimensions within social, cultural, and media discourses.

In such practices, children (often at a very young age) become the central faces of social media content, despite having no agency in the creation, decision-making, or management of that content. In this process, parents act as directors, editors, and publishers, placing their children in front of thousands or even millions of followers. As a result, children are exposed—without their own informed choice—to public comments, reactions, and even criticism from audiences. While this may appear to be a form of innocent family entertainment, it in fact creates a space in which particular representations of children and their identities are constructed. These representations can carry serious psychological, social, and even legal consequences for both the child and their parents.

This form of digital exploitation—driven by advertising revenue and the pursuit of followers—has been described as a modern form of digital servitude. Children who appear on their parents' Instagram accounts may unknowingly, and without full understanding of the consequences, become subjects of exploitation. Such practices can lead to psychological or social harm, highlighting the need for legal and ethical oversight (Khoshsalook, 2024). These dynamics parallel trends in other fields where the adoption of advanced technologies, despite offering efficiency and competitive advantage, routinely generates novel risks and unintended harms, underscoring that any embrace of innovation

without strategic foresight and comprehensive safeguards can produce outcomes as exploitative as they are profitable (Soroori Sarabi, Zamani, & Ranjbar, 2023).

Motivations such as the pursuit of financial success, the amplification of a child's identity in digital space, and the commercial use of the child's image are among the key drivers for some parent-bloggers (Ghasemzadeh Barki, Manteghi, & Mohammadi, 2020). These motivations may become so dominant that the child, before forming an independent identity, is turned into a tool for attention-seeking and profit-making. Such representations may result in the commodification of the child's body and identity, the erosion of privacy boundaries, and long-term psychological pressure. Posting children's images online without proper supervision or ethical reflection may expose them to exploitation, developmental disruptions, and lasting harm (Shariati, Zamanian, & Khalili, 2021). This systemic failure mirrors broader governance patterns where reactive policies—focused on individual behavior rather than structural safeguards—perpetuate harm by addressing symptoms rather than root causes (Taheri et al., 2022). Meanwhile, many parents or viewers describe this process not as child labor but merely as "play and entertainment." On the other hand, the issue of children's rights in digital environments remains deeply challenged. Moreover, research on media literacy interventions demonstrates that when educational strategies fail to actively involve parents as critical mediators, they remain insufficient to counter the powerful influence of digital content in shaping children's perceptions and normalizing exploitative norms (Hosseini, Nosrati, & Tomraee, 2025). Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the right to safe and equitable access to the internet, Iranian legislation still falls short of international standards in terms of protecting children in virtual spaces. Comparable shortcomings are evident in other domains of Iranian society, where technological adoption outpaces institutional readiness; for instance, despite widespread enthusiasm for AI integration into higher education, significant gaps remain in faculty preparedness and ethical governance structures (Rahmatian & Sharajsharifi, 2021). Studies show that the effective and ethical integration of advanced technologies requires not

only infrastructural investment but also continuous education, data literacy, and capacity-building among stakeholders to prevent misuse and ensure these tools genuinely serve public interests (Hosseini et al., 2021). The absence of regulatory frameworks for monitoring and protecting children online creates conditions in which representations of children can easily become instruments of exploitation—economically, symbolically, and discursively (Safariniya, 2022). This regulatory vacuum mirrors the broader crisis of digital sovereignty, where transnational platforms operate beyond meaningful state oversight—prioritizing corporate interests over vulnerable populations' rights (Sharifi Poor Bgheshmi & Sharajsharifi, 2025b).

Given these concerns, the present study, employing the method of critical discourse analysis, seeks to explore and identify the discourses constructed on Instagram pages managed by the parents of "virtual working children." The article aims to demonstrate how these discourses—by portraying children as ideal, flawless, happy, or hyper-consumerist figures—shape a pre-structured digital identity for children. This identity is not the result of children's own lived experiences, but rather a product of adult perspectives and algorithmic influences. The study seeks to answer questions such as: What discourses emerge in these Instagram pages regarding children and their identities? What kinds of identity formation do these discourses reproduce for children? Furthermore, it investigates the potential consequences—such as psychological pressure, unrealistic expectations, commodification of the body and face, and the gradual loss of privacy boundaries—that may arise from these representations. It also asks how the role of parents as directors of their children's virtual identities can be conceptualized.

Ultimately, this research offers a critical analysis of the mechanisms through which children's identities are represented on Instagram, focusing on six accounts centered on children but managed by parents. It argues that these representations are not merely reflections of childhood, but rather outcomes of discourses shaped by economic interests, aesthetic norms, and platform algorithms. The study also aims to highlight the ethical, cultural, and legal considerations necessary for rethinking this phenomenon and to support more informed policymaking in the fields of media regulation and

children's rights. Ethical awareness itself cannot be assumed as self-evident; research shows that even highly educated individuals often lack a clear understanding of basic ethical standards, underscoring the importance of explicit education to prevent the normalization of harmful practices (Sabbar, Masoomifar, & Mohammadi, 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on cultural and discursive theoretical approaches to examine the representation of children's identity on the Instagram pages managed by parents of "virtual working children." The theoretical and analytical framework of the research is informed by Stuart Hall's theory of representation, discourse theory, and Jean Baudrillard's sociological critique of consumer society.

1. Theory of Representation

Stuart Hall (1997) conceptualizes representation not as a direct reflection of external reality, but as a meaning-making process constructed through language, images, media, and discourse. According to Hall, meaning is produced within representational systems where signs acquire significance through culturally coded mechanisms. Thus, concepts such as "child," "parent," or "family" are not natural categories but are discursively constructed.

2. Discourse Theory

Discourse theory has become one of the most influential analytical frameworks in contemporary social sciences and humanities. It emphasizes how meanings, identities, and power relations are constructed and stabilized through language and representation. In this approach, discourse is not viewed merely as linguistic; rather, it includes a network of texts, institutions, and practices that socially anchor meanings and shape identities. Theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe emphasize the political and antagonistic nature of discourse, arguing that identities are temporarily and contingently constructed within discursive struggles. Moreover, this theory assumes that no meaning is ever fixed or inherent; all meanings are produced and reproduced within particular social and discursive contexts. Language, then, becomes a tool of domination, resistance, and the maintenance—or destabilization—of social order. Discourses do not

merely reflect social reality; they participate in its very construction (Howarth, 1998, pp. 159–163).

This framework allows the researcher to analyze not only the images and words used in the representation of children on parental Instagram pages but also the social and economic forces shaping those representations. Within such discourses, the child is visually positioned as an ideal figure, a success story, or a brand-friendly identity. These representations carry the signs of consumerism and function within Instagram's platform capitalism (Shahghasemi, 2021), where children are commodified in the attention economy to fulfill their parents' often profit-driven objectives. This reflects the core logic of digital extractivism—where platforms systematically privilege engagement metrics over human dignity, transforming childhood into algorithmic feedstock (Toosi et al., 2025).

3. Sociology of Consumer Society

In this analysis, Baudrillard's sociological concepts of the consumer society are also employed. According to Baudrillard (1998), in the modern world, consumption is no longer merely the fulfillment of need. Rather, identity, status, and meaning are produced and stabilized through consumption. In the consumer society, people consume signs—not products—and meaning emerges through symbolic systems. A child who appears on Instagram becomes part of a signifying and performative system in which the commodified child is placed on display for others' approval. This system is not merely entertaining but operates as a mechanism of identity construction from above. In such discursive frameworks, parents appear as directors of their child's identity, repetitively shaping the child into roles that may have little connection to their real, psychological, or developmental self. Fairclough's discourse analysis highlights these power relations and enables a critical examination of processes such as socialization, digital aesthetics, and children's agency in virtual spaces.

Therefore, by combining Hall's representation theory, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, and Baudrillard's critique of consumer culture—we seek to demonstrate how meaning, identity, and power are exercised upon children's bodies, faces, and lives through Instagram, and how these processes are reproduced within broader cultural and economic discourses.

4. Theory of the Attention Economy

The attention economy theory conceptualizes attention as the principal currency of the contemporary economy. Although some economists may resist treating attention as a medium of exchange, it possesses many characteristics of a monetary asset: it is scarce, sought after by those who lack it, and accumulated by those who already possess it. Attention can be transacted and used to acquire other forms of capital (Farhangi, Qaragozlu, & Solavatian, 2010, p. 9).

In this context, media operate as financial institutions within capitalism's attention economy. By constantly gathering audiences' attention, media consolidate individual micro-attentions and convert them into a major capital resource—much like banks aggregate financial assets. Thus, media are responsible for maximizing attention resources for the growing information market. Their role in transferring attention from the personal to the public sphere mirrors that of financial institutions in transferring capital from the individual to the national economy (Frank, Georg, 2005).

Social networks represent the most complete manifestation of the attention economy. These user-generated platforms create a structure in which attention is the primary reward and currency. On Twitter, for example, attention is the only value sought by all content producers. Those who succeed in attracting more attention gain more views and are perceived as more powerful. Success in these networks equates to the accumulation of pure attention, which in turn yields significant indirect financial benefits (Farhangi, Qaragozlu, & Solavatian, 2010, p. 10).

Given this structure, the attention economy is not only an economic concept but also a socio-cultural mechanism for reproducing distinction, status, and power within digital media. In this environment, success is defined by visibility and user engagement—not by expertise, experience, or content quality. As a result, children—due to their high emotional appeal—have become ideal subjects in the attention economy. Especially on Instagram, where visual representation dominates, the child's body, emotions, and lifestyle become sources of attention and thus, media capital for the family. In this process, audience attention operates not only as social validation but also as a tradable form of

capital. Similar tensions between technological potential and ethical constraints have been observed in the educational sector, where AI-driven tools are transforming management learning yet remain fraught with infrastructural, pedagogical, and ethical challenges that demand holistic and human-centered strategies for responsible implementation (Rahmatian & Sharajsharifi, 2022).

5. Instagram Child Labor

In legal terms, a *child* or *minor* refers to someone who has not yet reached the physical and psychological maturity required for social life. According to national legislation, the age of maturity varies depending on the domain—whether financial matters, marriage, labor, political rights, public employment, or retirement benefits. Furthermore, these legal thresholds differ between boys and girls. This lack of consistency in defining maturity has resulted in legal confusion, inconsistent enforcement, and harmful consequences (Esfandfard, 2007).

Additionally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, comprising a preamble and 54 articles, was ratified by the Islamic Republic of Iran in February 1994 and became part of national law. According to Article 1 of this convention, a child is defined as “any human being under the age of 18 unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (Nowruzzi, 2015). However, it is important to note that *childhood*, in different discursive systems, carries diverse meanings that have evolved over time. As such, the concept of childhood is not merely a legal or age-based matter; it is shaped through cultural and social discourses.

In today’s world, childhood and child labor can no longer be rigidly defined by age limits or legal documents such as the UN Declaration or the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The phenomenon known as “Instagram child labor” has emerged primarily among middle- and upper-class families, where actors are enabled to perform new forms of parenting while professing strong commitment to children’s rights (Aghaei & Rezaei, 2019). These parents often express deep concern for their children’s education, skill development, health, clothing, nutrition, and recreation—yet simultaneously engage in economic exploitation of their children’s bodies and lives within digital platforms.

Moreover, the concept of Instagram child labor has not yet been formally recognized in Iranian society, and thus it is not categorized under existing legal classifications such as “children at risk” or “socially harmed children.” This reflects a wider tendency across digital innovation to celebrate technological potential while neglecting the development of ethical safeguards and regulatory frameworks, allowing systemic inequalities to persist unchallenged (Sakhaei et al., 2024). In addition, the forms of labor involved and the social forces that drive them remain overlooked by dominant child rights discourses. Comparable tensions are evident in other domains where technologies promoted as solutions to entrenched inequities, such as telemedicine, have simultaneously reinforced digital divides and ethical concerns, underscoring the need for critical frameworks to distinguish genuine empowerment from superficially progressive narratives (Toosi et al., 2025). From another perspective, Instagram child labor may be viewed as a new form of slavery in the era of visual media. In this form of bondage, the child’s body and psyche are not deployed in factories or on the streets but are instead mobilized within the frame of the image, subject to the logic of algorithms and the architecture of digital space. The child is not merely represented but is transformed into a visual commodity at the center of the parents’ economic activity—whose value lies in the attention it can attract.

In this process, not only the child’s body and behavior, but also their emotions and lived moments, are converted into content. The child’s body becomes encoded through the filtered gaze of the audience, and even states such as illness, exhaustion, or private moments may be repackaged as entertainment, inspiration, or marketing material. This represents a form of parental ownership that goes beyond traditional caregiving, manifesting as media-based control over the child.

Parents who appear outwardly concerned with their child’s well-being and growth may, in practice, turn the child into an instrument for constructing their own social identity. Visitors to these Instagram pages are not merely viewing a child—they are witnessing a carefully curated performance, in which the mother acts as a blogger and the child plays the lead role. Psychological factors, including parental personality traits and tendencies toward social insecurity or status-seeking, can significantly shape

these dynamics, highlighting how underlying dispositions contribute to social incompatibility and exploitative practices (Jamali, Salehi, & Chorami, 2022). In this context, the child learns that being seen is a condition of being, and that a moment unrecorded is a moment that never happened.

This form of representation may fundamentally alter the trajectory of identity formation in the child. The child is no longer simply *experiencing* childhood; rather, they are learning to live as content. At this point, the attention economy and media-based parenting transform the private process of a child's development into a public, consumable spectacle.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the expansion of digital space and the rapid growth of platforms such as Instagram have given rise to new forms of child labor in virtual contexts—commonly referred to as “*virtual child labor*” or “*Instagram children*.” Numerous domestic and international studies have explored various aspects of this phenomenon, although detailed discourse analyses of how children's identities are represented in these spaces remain relatively scarce.

A study by Khojir and Farmand Khaneqeshlaghi (2023), focusing on the virtual lives of children featured on their parents' Instagram pages, shows that these representations are often reproduced through specific templates such as the “adorable child,” the “brandable child,” and the “advertising agent.” The authors describe these portrayals as forms of “*real-time exploitation*,” emphasizing that the primary goal of many such accounts is to attract followers and generate advertising revenue.

From a sociological perspective, Kordbacheh, Savadian, and Shakerbeigi (2024) employed grounded theory to analyze the social drivers behind the emergence of virtual child labor. They introduced the concept of the “*virtual child slave*,” concluding that parents—acting as employers—transform the child into a performative and profitable figure, subject to virtual commodification. Their research identifies three common typologies of virtual children: *the fast-return child*, *the showcase child*, and *the haloed child*.

In a related study, Aghaei and Rezania (2019) examined the concept of “Instagram child labor” and found that the child's body and behavior are used as tools for visual display, maternal branding, advertising, and even audience voyeurism. They argue that such representations constitute a form of commodification of childhood in media environments.

In another contribution, Ghasemzadeh Barki, Manteghi, and Mohammadi (2020) investigated the psychological, economic, and social motivations of Iranian “mom bloggers” who exploit their children online. They identified eight key motives, including the desire for social recognition, financial success, child entertainment, and the digital branding of the child.

Biranvand (2020), in a legal study, emphasized the lack of explicit and deterrent legislation protecting children in digital spaces. He highlighted consequences such as psychological harm, privacy violations, and social risks arising from the widespread sharing of children's images and personal information online.

In the area of policy development, Faramarziyan, Ansari, Soltanifar, and Mozaffari (2021) proposed a six-level model for protecting children's privacy in virtual environments. Their framework includes cultural, legal, social, educational, economic, and managerial strategies. The model stresses that safeguarding children's online privacy requires multidimensional cooperation between families, government institutions, legal frameworks, and digital platforms.

Alruwaily et al. (2020) examined the prevalence and nutritional quality of food and beverage product placements in YouTube videos created by the five most-watched child influencers aged 3 to 14 years in 2019. Utilizing Socialbakers data, the researchers selected 50 of the most-viewed videos and 50 videos that included food or drinks in their thumbnails, totaling a sample of 418 videos. These were systematically coded to determine whether the influencers consumed or interacted with food or toys, how long food or drink items appeared, and whether the items were branded or unbranded. Nutritional assessments were conducted using the Nutrient Profile Model. The study found that 179 videos featured food or drink items, amounting to 291 instances, with an overwhelming majority

(90.34%) being unhealthy branded products such as McDonald's. The remaining featured unhealthy unbranded items (4.1%), healthy unbranded items (3.1%), and healthy branded items (2.4%). These videos, including those with food and beverage content, amassed more than 48 billion views, with over 1 billion views specifically on videos with food content. The authors concluded that child influencers are significant vectors for unhealthy food marketing through product placements, calling for stricter regulatory oversight by the Federal Trade Commission to protect young audiences from exposure to unhealthy food advertising.

Rafsanjani (2022) investigated the legal protections available to child influencers in Indonesia, focusing on the risks of child exploitation within the influencer marketing industry. As advancements in technology and internet access have facilitated the rise of influencer marketing, the use of child influencers—often without their informed consent—has raised significant ethical and legal concerns. This normative juridical study employed qualitative analysis based on literature review to assess the adequacy of existing legal frameworks in safeguarding children's rights. The paper highlighted the vulnerability of children in this sector, emphasizing that children are not fully capable of making independent decisions about their participation in influencer activities, which can compromise their emotional and physical development. Rafsanjani reviewed several legal instruments, including Indonesia's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child through Presidential Decree No. 36 of 1990, the amendment to Article 28B(2) of the 1945 Constitution, and Law No. 23 of 2002 on Child Protection. The study concluded that while legal protections exist, their implementation requires reinforcement through proactive programs and cooperation among all stakeholders to ensure children are not exploited under the guise of digital content creation.

Castillo-Abdul, Romero-Rodríguez, and Larrea-Ayala (2020) investigated the thematic content of the ten most-followed Spanish children's YouTube channels and examined how these themes correlated with digital engagement among preteen audiences. Using an interpretive-based content analysis approach, the authors employed a coding sheet validated by expert judgment to analyze video topics and identify patterns in viewer interaction. The study found that most of the featured child influencers

were currently aged 10 to 12 and had been active on the platform for approximately five years, indicating early entry into content creation. A key finding was the gender-based divergence in content themes: male influencers predominantly engaged in gameplay videos, whereas female influencers were more active in the lifestyle category. These thematic differences underscore how gender roles are reflected and potentially reinforced in digital media spaces targeted at children. The authors concluded that the popularity and influence of these channels underscore the necessity for parental oversight, as unregulated exposure could perpetuate gender stereotypes and present questionable role models for impressionable viewers.

In sum, although domestic research has largely focused on parental motivations and legal concerns, discourse-oriented analyses of child identity representation and its semantic and cultural implications within parental Instagram pages remain limited. The present study seeks to fill this gap by drawing upon Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis to offer a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on the theoretical model proposed by Norman Fairclough. Fairclough defines discourse as "an instance of language use involving the use of semiotic systems that contribute to the construction of social identity, social relations, and systems of knowledge and meaning" (Phillips & Jørgensen, p. 119).

According to Fairclough, language is a form of social action. To reveal the influence of society on language, it is essential to integrate text, society, and linguistic structure to demonstrate that language use is itself a social practice (Fattouhi, 2011, p. 346). He argues that discourse, as a form of communication, plays a significant role in shaping social identity, social relations, and knowledge systems. Thus, discourse functions as a powerful medium in the reconstruction of social identity.

In line with this perspective, Fairclough stresses that textual analysis alone is insufficient to uncover the links between discourse and broader social and cultural structures. He advocates for an interdisciplinary approach, asserting: "The benefit of

using macro-sociological traditions is that they maintain social structure and power relations shape social practices. The role of interpretive traditions, in turn, is to show how individuals, through everyday practices, creatively generate rule-bound worlds" (Phillips & Jørgensen, p. 116).

From another perspective, "discourse refers to all phenomena that express a kind of interactive practice and the relationships among them, constructed through speech, writing, or visual representation" (Maleki, Salehi, Yazerlou, & Rabiei, 2016, p. 59).

Fairclough is recognized as one of the leading theorists in Critical Discourse Analysis. He argues that dominant discourses are often transformed into shared beliefs and emotions within a society. The power of discourse lies in its ability to naturalize specific ideologies, making them appear commonsensical, while the discourses of dominant social groups become hegemonic (Jahangiri & Bandarrigizadeh, 2013, p. 66).

Fairclough further explains that the main objective of CDA is to expose the hidden dimensions of discourse—particularly those that are ideological. CDA reveals what has been naturalized through discursive systems and dominant ideologies. In this view, discourse and social structures are mutually constitutive: social structures shape the features of discourse, while discourse, in turn, influences those very structures. Thus, revealing the underlying layers of discourse requires not only identifying its unique linguistic features but also uncovering its associated social structures (Jahangiri & Bandarrigizadeh, 2013, p. 67).

Fairclough proposes a three-level analytical model for conducting CDA:

1. Description: analyzing vocabulary, grammar, verb usage, and semantic relations in the text;
2. Interpretation: connecting textual content with the interpreter's knowledge and experience;
3. Explanation: uncovering the relationship between discourse and social structures—particularly where power and ideology are embedded (Fairclough, 2008, pp. 19, 215, 245).

Fairclough himself notes that these stages are flexible and adaptable depending on the context of the study. This flexibility enables interdisciplinary

research and the development of novel forms of CDA (Jahangiri & Bandarrigizadeh, 2013, p. 65).

Based on this analytical framework, the present research focuses on Persian-language public Instagram accounts managed by parents who center their content around their children. The statistical population consists of public Persian-speaking Instagram pages, while the sample includes six selected accounts that meet criteria such as: child-centered content, signs of economic exploitation of the child, a high number of followers, and consistent activity. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the selected data are closely aligned with the qualitative nature of the study, yielding rich, meaningful, and thematically relevant content for analysis.

FINDINGS

In this section, utilizing Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we examined the content of six child-centered Instagram pages managed by parents. These accounts—each operated under the child's name—share common characteristics such as a high follower count, an emphasis on the child's appearance and behavior, regular and professional content production, and the direct or indirect use of the child in advertisements for products and services. The analysis follows Fairclough's three-level model, including textual description, interpretation, and explanation.

1. Textual Analysis (Descriptive Level)

Across all analyzed pages, children are consistently portrayed with features such as physical attractiveness, playful speech, distinctive poses, and unique clothing styles. The linguistic style of the captions is typically informal, friendly, and at times humorous. However, these texts are saturated with gender stereotypes and surface-level value judgments. Phrases like "*my little doll*," "*our fancy boy*," "*my economic daughter*," "*our sweetie pie*," or "*Mr. stylish*" carry heavy connotations and place children within predefined, repetitive, and stereotypical frameworks.

Emotions such as crying, sulking, excitement, jealousy, or joy are repeatedly showcased and are often instrumentalized in captions to evoke empathy or laughter. In many videos, children's dialogue is mimicked from adults—especially their mothers. They speak either in their mother's voice or act out

pre-scripted scenarios. Statements like *“Hi kids, I’m doing an ad,” “Which one do you prefer, this or that?” “I picked out the new couch,”* or *“I took all the kids’ holiday money to take them to the amusement park”* illustrate this learned imitation, masked as child agency.

2. Interpretation (Meaning-Making Level)

At the level of meaning production and reproduction, all the analyzed pages follow a consistent pattern: the child is placed at the center of content, the parents—especially mothers—serve as content creators and directors, and the audience becomes an integral part of the consumption and admiration cycle. Many posts involve scripted scenarios, where the child acts in specific promotional or dramatized roles—from breaking a television to promote home appliances, to feigning jealousy toward the father or arguing over furniture choices.

In these pages, mothers are not merely narrators; they are narrative designers, directors, and active agents in exploiting their children’s presence. In some cases, followers are even encouraged to emulate these mothers and view them as models of ideal parenting.

Some differences are also observable. For example, certain children remain passive subjects (merely posing and appearing cute), while others—more experienced in content creation—appear to have acquired a degree of performative agency, seemingly accepting and learning how to play their roles. However, they still operate within the discursive framework defined by their parents.

3. Explanation (Macro-Level Discourses)

At the broader discursive level, these Instagram pages reflect several key social discourses simultaneously—discourses that manifest in language, practice, and ideology:

- **The Attention Economy Discourse.** Children function as the primary tools for attracting attention, likes, comments, shares, and ultimately, advertising collaborations. Like all engagement-driven platforms, these systems outsource ethical responsibility—converting child protection into parental media literacy challenges rather than redesigning their extractive architectures (Khodabin et al., 2022). They

are not the product per se—they are the producers of attention, and attention in this context is equivalent to capital.

- **Child Commodification.** Children’s bodies, behaviors, emotions, and even private moments (e.g., eating, sleeping, sulking, reconciling) are converted into consumable content. This emotional content can be directly leveraged for product marketing, transforming it into commercial value. Such systematic conversion of personal identity into marketable content reflects broader platform mechanisms that optimize human experience for commercial gain (Toosi et al., 2024).

- **Ideology of Successful Digital Motherhood.** Within these discourses, the “ideal mother” is one whose child wears branded clothes, has many followers, is entertaining and lovable. A good mother is seen as someone who can effectively manage and monetize the child through representation. This performance of digital motherhood reflects a critical media literacy gap—where parents internalize platform metrics (likes, shares) as validation of parenting success, unaware they are complicit in systemic child commodification (Arsalani et al., 2025).

- **Consumerism and Aestheticization of Childhood.** These pages explicitly link the child’s beauty, luxury clothing, appearance, and fashion to attributes such as success, intelligence, self-confidence, and social value. Such narratives echo broader discourses surrounding AI’s promise of empowerment, where optimism about technological progress routinely conceals structural inequalities and normalizes unregulated practices (Rahmatian, 2025). Even very young children are evaluated based on standards of style and luxury.

- **Controlled Agency of the Child.** At first glance, children in these pages appear to speak freely, make choices, and assert opinions. However, closer analysis of the production style reveals that this apparent agency is actually a reproduction of pre-scripted roles, and the child functions more as a skilled performer of adult-directed narratives.

Table A: Discourse Analysis of Instagram-Based Parenting Accounts

Sample	Descriptive Level	Interpretive Level	Explanatory Level
Sample 1	Use of emotional, sweet, and promotional vocabulary. Mimicking the mother's speech. Emphasis on the child's appearance and clothing.	Content built around the child's daily behaviors. Mother as director. Child at the center of commercial attention.	Child as a marketing tool. Power in parents' hands. Absence of supportive institutions.
Sample 2	Humorous, play-oriented, use of fabricated vocabulary. Performative storytelling. Mimicking dialogues.	Scriptwriting for advertising. Use of performative actions to attract attention.	Performative parenting. Normalization of child labor through humor and laughter.
Sample 3	Silent visual narration. Focus on style and beauty. Elimination of the child's voice.	Child appears as a professional model. Personal branding structure.	Visual consumerism. Aestheticization of childhood. Child = commodity.
Sample 4	Mimicked phrases. Role-play. Childlike speech with adult structure.	Creation of humorous and performative scenarios. Mother as narrative guide.	Discourse of the entertaining child. Visibility as success.
Sample 5	Economic mimicry. Child as shopping consultant. Money-centered vocabulary.	Content designed around the child's economic behavior. Highlighting the child's role.	Child = calculating being. Financial value creation discourse in childhood.
Sample 6	Independent yet rehearsed speech. Professional posing. Apparent agency.	Active child, aware of the camera. Playing professional roles in videos.	Internalization of promotional role. Child = performer in the digital market.

CONCLUSION

This study, focusing on the discourse analysis of children's identity representation on parents' Instagram pages, reveals that the portrayal of children in these digital spaces reflects not their lived experiences, developmental needs, or authentic emotions, but rather follows the logic of the attention economy and the production of symbolic capital for the parents. On Instagram, children are displayed with attributes such as beauty, charm, advertising talent, and audience appeal—traits not derived from their own experiences, but rather shaped by dominant adult-centered discourses that use the child as a means of reflecting the social status of the parents.

In all analyzed cases, the child occupies a central role in the content, yet this role does not originate from their own agency. Instead, it is shaped by parental action, in which the child is instrumentalized for branding and display purposes. The child's presence on these pages involves

mimicking parental speech and behavior, performing pre-scripted scenarios, advertising commercial products, and participating in pseudo-realistic representations of everyday life—representations that, in reality, are structured by platform algorithms, advertising logic, and neoliberal market dynamics.

This study highlights that the linguistic, visual, and narrative structures of posts and stories are fed by discourses such as "successful parenting," "child-centered consumerism," "the ideal branded child," and "normalization of child labor disguised as entertainment." Within this framework, mothers, as the primary content creators, often act not as caretakers of the child's psychological development, but rather as brand managers and designers of the child's media identity.

At the societal level, this form of representation blurs the boundaries between a child's right to privacy, natural development, and voluntary participation. Comparable patterns can be observed

across many domains of digital transformation, where widespread optimism about technological innovation coexists with persistent deficiencies in regulation, critical literacy, and accountability structures, ultimately allowing systemic inequalities to be reproduced under the guise of progress (Tomraee, Hosseini, & Toosi, 2022). In these digital spaces, children are not only deprived of adequate legal and ethical protections, but are also frequently subjected to widespread exploitation due to their visual appeal and marketability—an exploitation that remains undefined within the existing frameworks of children's rights, and largely unacknowledged in both Iranian and global media policy discourse. Comparable dynamics have been observed in other sectors where algorithmic technologies are adopted: while such tools promise efficiency and resilience, they simultaneously create systemic vulnerabilities and ethical risks that remain insufficiently regulated, underscoring the need for proactive governance and standardized safeguards (Nosraty et al., 2025). Studies show that AI systems exemplify this duality, as they can be mobilized to enhance public resilience in disaster contexts while simultaneously entrenching surveillance capitalism and data commodification, a contradiction that underscores the necessity of governance frameworks explicitly designed to safeguard democratic agency (Sharifi Poor Bgheshmi & Sharajsharifi, 2025a).

In sum, this research demonstrates that Instagram child labor represents a new form of child labor in the digital economy—one masked by beauty, humor, and affection, but fundamentally embedded with narratives of inequality, exploitation, consumerism, and the erasure of child agency. Similarly, recent research highlights that in healthcare settings, enthusiasm for AI's transformative promise often coexists with significant gaps in ethical preparedness and professional training, underscoring the broader challenge of integrating advanced technologies without reinforcing systemic vulnerabilities (Tomraee, Toosi, & Arsalani, 2024). This phenomenon underscores the urgent need for critical reflection and reform in legal, ethical, and educational policies surrounding the representation of children on social media platforms. Such reforms should incorporate educational frameworks that address both individual media literacy and institutional accountability, ensuring platforms prioritize child wellbeing over engagement metrics -

much like how ethical businesses integrate education as both moral imperative and operational necessity (Zamani et al., 2024). Recent scholarship underscores that redefining media literacy to encompass critical AI competencies—such as evaluating algorithmic bias, understanding data privacy, and fostering ethical engagement—is essential to empower individuals and communities to navigate and challenge exploitative digital infrastructures (Khodabin et al., 2024). These multidimensional solutions must challenge the current platform architectures that normalize child commodification while appearing to celebrate family content.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of Interest declared by the author(s).

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