

“Instagram has well and truly got a hold of me”: Exploring a parent’s representation of her children

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Images of children and family life are prevalent across social media contexts. In particular, *Instagram* is a popular platform for sharing photographs and videos of children and families. This paper explores the representation of children and family life, with an emphasis on the ‘image of the child’ that exists on Instagram. A qualitative case study methodology was used to analyse a parent’s Instagram posts for one month and her questionnaire responses. The deep meaning that Instagram holds in her life will be explored, the processes she engages in to take and share photos, and key issues and ideas for educators, researchers, and family members to consider. Focus will be drawn towards the ‘image of the child’ as understood by early childhood educators, and how the image of children presented in this parent’s Instagram posts compares or contrasts to that.

Introduction

The ‘image of the child’ is a significant construct in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Educators in ECEC hold an ‘image’ or view of children which is strong, appreciative, and multidimensional. In particular, children are acknowledged as unique individuals with capabilities and rich potential, whose agency, voice, and choice should be respected. The ‘image of the child’ that exists in ECEC is central to this work and guides educators’ relationships with, support of, and advocacy for children.

There are many images of the child and of childhood which exist (Rinaldi, 2013). These beliefs come to the fore in many ways – including, for example, in how early childhood educators relate to and represent children. The representation of children online is of growing interest, given the advent of social media and the widespread visibility this has afforded children. Across different social media contexts, children are represented in a variety of ways (e.g. photos, blog posts) by different people (e.g. family, schools, brands). *Instagram* – which has been described as a “photo album for children” (Choi & Lewallen, 2017, p.1) – contains multitudes of photos and videos representing children. The visual image (referred to in this paper as visual representations or photographs) of children and childhood that exists in this context is worth considering. Instagram is a highly popular platform where potential exists for its users to be influenced by the posts with which they engage. Many users who share visual representations of children on Instagram have high follower counts and, thus, broader reach.

Our curiosities about contemporary representations of children and childhood that are apparent on Instagram, and how these might compare or contrast with the ECEC ‘image of the child’, led to the development of a research project exploring the representation of children and family life by an influencer parent. This paper reports on the exploration and examination of the influencer parent’s Instagram, including

the ways in which she represents her children, the process behind this representation, and the underpinning intentions.

Background

The representation of children in the public sphere is a critical issue that merits careful consideration. Children are represented in a multitude of ways, by different people, for various purposes. For example, children have long featured as characters in film and television, or in marketing campaigns. More recently, children have become subject to highly visible representation across social media contexts such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram*. It is important to reflect on the nature of their representation, including how children are depicted, by whom, for what purposes, and to what extent children have choice and voice in this. For instance, are children afforded the opportunity to share their opinions on their own representation, or are they afforded choice regarding what is depicted and what is not? Under the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, children have a right to voice their opinions regarding matters concerning them (United Nations, 1989). The extent to which this is realised is less certain, and worth consideration – particularly in the digital age. Other considerations are that viewers of these representations may draw conclusions about children and childhood, which may not align to the early childhood educators' construct.

Children's rights in the digital age have been examined in terms of data surveillance (Lupton & Williamson, 2017), tensions in child-specific online protections (Macenaite, 2017), the phenomena of influencer parents and 'digital labour' where children generate income (Abidin, 2017), and the ethics of 'sharenting' where parents share information about their children on social media (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). With regard to social media contexts, it is imperative to recognise their moral, social, and political significance (Nelson, 2018) as well as the opportunities and risks these platforms present (Aroldi & Vittadini, 2017). Rights to privacy in social media contexts have been explored through a lens of legal consciousness (Sarikakis & Winter, 2017) and with a mind towards parental monitoring and mediation of their children's online presence (Leaver, 2017). In ECEC, pedagogical documentation is a practice which seeks to make children's learning visible. With regards to documentation, Cheeseman & Robertson (2006, p. 193) asked, "... are we always mindful of the voice and thinking of children—their right to privacy and personal moments, their right to ownership of their thoughts and notions, their right to decide what is preserved and what is lost?" This question bears weight for children's representation in online contexts, where aspects of their lives are presented and preserved by people other than themselves.

In considering the representation of children on social media, and in particular, on an overtly visual platform such as *Instagram*, it is vital to acknowledge the power of visual representations. On this, Pauwels (2015, p. 310) wrote, "Visual representations not only give way to the depicted subject or object, but also tend to embody very revealing aspects about the producer and culture of production." Internet phenomena

such as social media are considered “unique expressions of present-day culture” (Pauwels, 2015, p. 65). Visual representations are situated within histories and hierarchies, and embedded within are perceptions, whether intentional or accidental, about the nature of children and childhood (Vänskä, 2017). The production of representations involves multiple factors that potentially produce multiple meanings that may differ between the producer(s), participant(s), and the audience (Vänskä, 2017). Regarding this, Vänskä (2017, p. 24) wrote, “... there is no such thing as a single, globally understood meaning or identically shared image literacy.” This is important to consider when contemplating the image of the child – that is, when children are represented on a highly visual, popular, and accessible platform such as Instagram, what is being communicated about children and childhood? It is important to note that children themselves may have no agency over their own representation (Choi & Lewallen, 2017; Leaver, 2017), which creates tensions and complexities in terms of their rights.

This study calls focus to images of children and childhood on Instagram, and how these may be influencing our broader understanding of who children are and how they live alongside us. This paper reports on the perspectives and experiences of a parent who routinely shares photos of her children on Instagram and includes an analysis of her representation of her children.

Theoretical grounding

Regarding visual analysis, Pauwels (2015, p. 28) wrote, “Without theory, our seeing is blind or tends to rest on unexplained views and expectations.” Therefore, during the development of this project, we explored our theoretical grounding extensively. Our ways of seeing children hinge on the image of children held by ECEC educators and also on the ethical ideals educators embrace regarding their responsibility to form productive partnerships with families and communities. For instance, The Early Childhood Australia [ECA] Code of Ethics (ECA, 2016) delineates principles for listening to, learning with, and openly communicating with families, and respecting families’ rights to privacy and confidentiality.

Figure 1 depicts the framework used for analysing visual representations of children. Our development of this framework was informed by positioning theory and grounded in a number of assumptions regarding visual representations. Positioning theory examines how individuals position themselves and others through the use of particular “images, metaphors, story lines, and concepts” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46). There is an emphasis on the distribution of rights, about which Harré (2006) writes, “Revealing the subtle patterns of the distributions of rights to speak and act in certain ways can open up the possibility of their transformation.” We were interested in applying this to how parents position themselves and their children when representing their lives, activities, and interactions in a forum like Instagram. As such, the framework evolved to include focus on the interactivity between elements and evidence of point-of-view and voice.

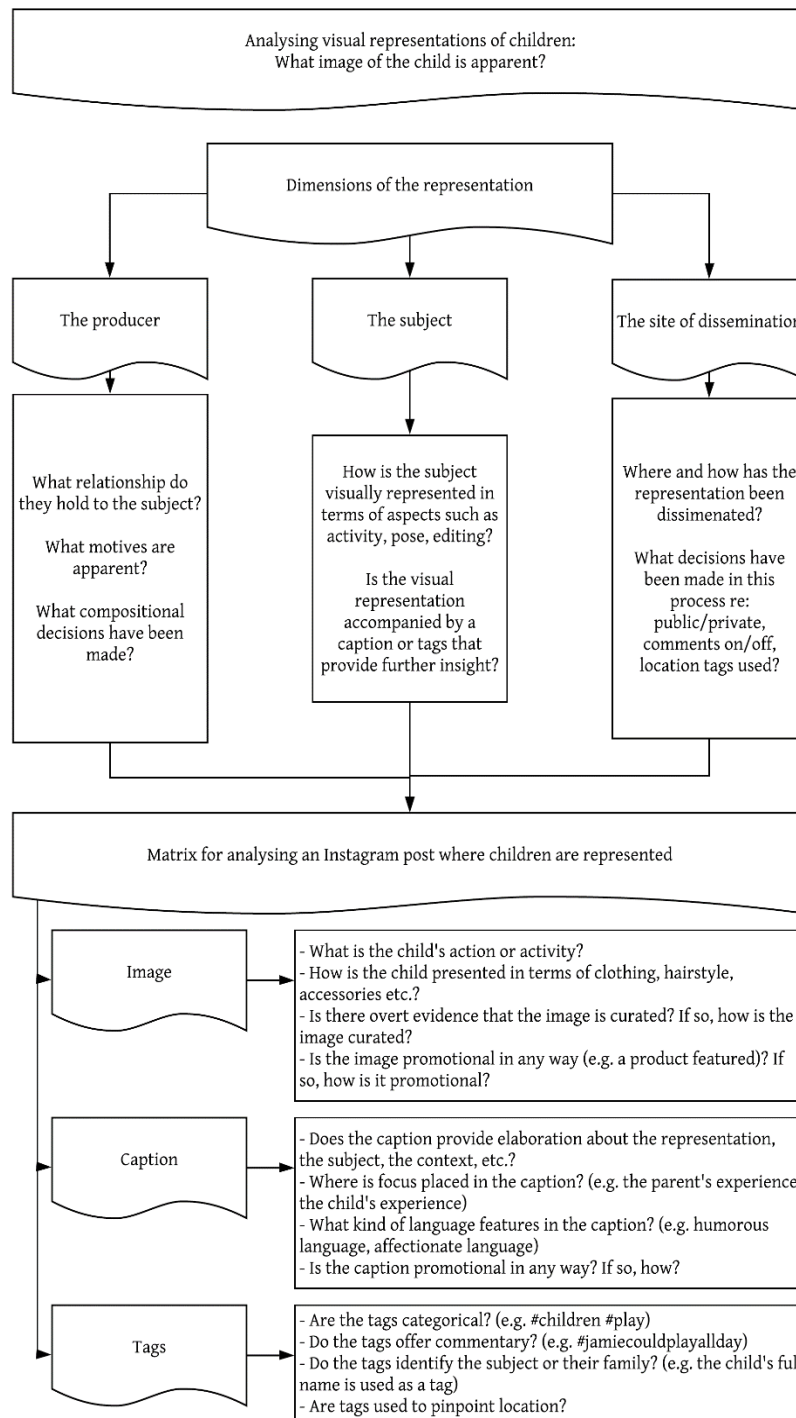


Figure 1: Framework for analysing visual representations of children (use PDF reader 'zoom in' function to view)

Furthermore, the framework is founded on the recognition that visual representations are “constructed and carefully considered entities” (Vänskä, 2017) where complexities are apparent. Lerum & Dworkin (2009, p. 255) wrote,

... images are a site of social power, struggle, and conflict... all images are socially produced within particular contexts for particular purposes, and all images are also socially consumed, navigated, ignored, or subverted within particular contexts for particular purposes.

Within the broad category of visual representations, this project focuses on photographic representations of children, which are positioned by Pauwels (2015) as inarguably important due to their pervasiveness, the ease of their production, and their indexical and iconic qualities. Significance is attributed to qualities of, not only the photographic representation of the subject, their actions, and their context and the accompanying content, such as the caption and tags, and the extent to which the representation is made public. As such, our view of the representation is holistic through an examination of the interconnection of elements and their meaning potential.

The theoretical grounding presented some ethical quandaries. It is not sufficient to approach analysis with the ‘producer’ and ‘subject’ in mind – this project focused on parents and children, and though they occupy the roles of ‘producer’ and ‘subject’, they are more than that. Through an ECEC-orientated lens, an ethical imperative to humanise parents and children was considered, to relate to them respectfully, and to invite their voices. This contributed significantly to how ethics and methodology was approached. This is explored in the following section.

Method

Research design

This is the first phase of a larger study focused on the representation of children on Instagram. In this phase, we engaged in a single qualitative case study of an influencer parent for one month. A case study approach was selected as it aligned to our theoretical lens, and gave us the opportunity to focus on our participants’ personal contexts, perspectives, her interactions and communications with the wider world (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013), and within all of this, her positioning of herself and her children. The research questions were as follows:

- How are children represented in the parent’s posts?
- What decisions are made in the creation, curation, and publication of photographs of children and family life?
- What ‘image of children and childhood’ exists in this context?

The case study integrated two sources of data, including the parent influencer’s Instagram posts and her participation in a questionnaire.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained through Curtin University's Human Research Ethics Committee and the study was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007).

Our ethical approach was also informed by the principles delineated in the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Ethical Code (EECERA, 2015) and the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Code of Ethics (ECA, 2016). EECERA's Ethical Code embraces an ethic of respect, while ECA's Code – whilst having a pedagogical focus – has principles of relevance to those engaged in research with children and families. In particular, we kept in mind ECA's statements around respectful partnerships with families (ECA, 2016). Furthermore, Eastham's (2011) writing around public/private in online spaces and Markham and Buchanan's (2012) Internet-specific ethical questions guided us towards a comprehensive model of research ethics.

Participant

Alice (pseudonym) is a wife and mother living in an Australian rural community. She and her partner have four children who were aged 5, 7, 9 and 11 at time of data collection. Alice was invited to participate in the project on the basis of her high follower count (n=19,000) and her influencer status amongst her community of followers. Alice's Instagram focuses on family life and includes extensive representation of her children.

Data collection

There were two sources of data: (1) Alice's Instagram posts during November 2018; and, (2) Alice's questionnaire responses.

Protected *iPads* were used to access Instagram daily and take screen-captures of posts. Due to logistics around time constraints, capturing Instagram stories became an issue – these were collected on a more ad-hoc basis than regular posts.

All posts were de-identified before uploading to *NVivo12* for analysis. The de-identification process included redacting the participant's username, location tags, and any other text which may be identifying, as well as crystallising the subjects' identifying attributes (e.g. facial features, visible birthmarks, personal artefacts such as jewelry, or belongings customised with identifying information), and ultimately rendering the photographs in grayscale sketch-style for dissemination.

The questionnaire intended to seek contextual information about Alice and her family, explore her relationship with Instagram and identify key information regarding her processes in creating and sharing content (see Appendix 1).

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Each post collected from Alice’s Instagram account was coded in *NVivo12* using the analytical framework (see Figure 1). Categories and sub-categories emerged as the first researcher examined each item. Once complete, the second researcher used the categories and sub-categories, adding to them as new categories were found and defined. Categories were developed around aspects of each item. For example, images were looked at to determine the subject of the photo, where/how a child may have been positioned, or whether the pose and presentation of the child was childlike or adultified. All data was cross-coded by the researchers.

Mutual understanding of the categories was clarified during the coding process where both researchers justified decisions they had made for a specific item to judge similarities/differences. In each instance, there were similar ideas apparent about the coding. After each post was independently analysed by each of the researchers in isolation and the final coding tree examined, a clear picture emerged of the weightings of each category and sub-category.

Limitations

This is a small-scale, single case study of one parent influencer. This was due to the low response rate from other prospective participants. Recruitment in this area of research can be challenging as there is often no tangible connection between the researchers and prospective participants. Those who did respond often declined because they didn’t have availability to commit to the project, or because they didn’t want to grant access to their social media for the purpose of research.

We acknowledge that there are many different representations of children across social media. Alice’s views of her relationship with Instagram and her representation of her children and family life are unique to her, her family, and her followers, and offer insights that are worthy of consideration as adults and children continue navigating social media contexts and matters around representation.

Exploring Alice’s relationship with and use of Instagram

This section details our findings. It begins with an exploration of Alice’s relationship with and use of Instagram, then examines her processes involved in creating and sharing content, and then explores her representation of her children. Woven throughout are questions and provocations which we return to in the final section focusing on recommendations.

“Instagram has well and truly got a hold of me”: Exploring Alice’s relationship with and use of Instagram

Alice started using Instagram in 2012. Regarding this, she reflects, “I came for the fancy filters, I didn’t actually realise it was a social media platform at all. Once I got my head

around it and started to discover amazing accounts/businesses/brands, I quickly became (and still am) its biggest fan.” She connects her use of Instagram to her life in a rural locality, explaining, “[this] explains my excessive Instagram use and even more excessive online shopping habits.”

Alice’s appreciation of Instagram is vividly apparent – with enthusiasm, she explains her love for the platform and describes herself as “obsessed.” There are many contributing factors to this love and obsession. She describes Instagram as a “visual feast” with “next level” imagery and inspiration. About this, she reflects, “I invest so much time and thought into my Instagram - I definitely crossed the line to obsessed status a long time ago. I love the inspiration I get and I love sharing and inspiring others.” As well as seeking to inspire others, Alice treasures the connections afforded to her by Instagram: “I love the friendships and connections I have made over the years, so many cyber and real-life friendships established and sustained.” Many of these connections were evident during our analysis of Alice’s posts – there are several users who consistently engage with her posts by liking and commenting, which typically initiates a dialogue between them and Alice. These dialogues are teeming with a sense of solidarity. For example, in a post where Alice vents about the stresses of being a working mother with her partner currently away, comments from followers empathise with her challenges and offering well wishes. Throughout their comments and Alice’s replies, a sense of community comes to the fore, characterised by warmth and recognition.

“The perfect pic doesn’t come easy”: Examining the process of content creation and dissemination

There is an intensive process in which Alice engages when posting on Instagram. She explains, “I don’t like to post on the run, so I guess you could say all posts are planned.” Beyond planning posts, Alice also takes numerous photos and engages in an extensive process of selection and curation. Regarding this, she reflects:

I take anything from five photos to twenty. The perfect pic doesn’t come easy, in fact I often don’t get it at all - this can be quite annoying for the kids. There’s quite a process: select best pic, edit it, compose comment, save in drafts, edit pic again, edit comment, draft – and then eventually post. It’s kind of exhausting. I’m fussy when selecting photos to post – I use *iPhone* only, so the quality can be very hit and miss. I like my pics to be very sharp and well framed, with perfect lighting - not always easy to achieve.

In the context of this statement, Alice’s children might seem like an afterthought – but she does engage her family in the process. She emphasises that she is “very respectful of the subjects in my photos” – largely, these subjects are her children, although at times she and her partner do feature. Alice elaborates on the parameters she sets:

I don’t post photos of people without their permission, including my kids, although they luckily always approve. They often help me select photos to be posted. They sometimes take photos themselves and ask me to post – which I rarely do.

Alice’s choice to “rarely” share her children’s own photos is not something she discussed further, but is perhaps attributable to her being “very conscious” of what she posts and her self-described perfectionism. A consequence of this is that her children’s representations of self or family life are not made visible in the way the children wish. This raises questions around the extent to which the children’s voices and choices are acknowledged and respected. During the data collection period, all photos shared were taken by Alice. The only creations of her children’s making were work samples and playthings photographed and shared by Alice, thus filtering their voices and contributions through her lens.

Regarding the children’s approval of Alice’s posts, this deserves critical examination. We question the circumstances surrounding their approval – are the children and Alice engaged in rich dialogue around this, or are the requests made for their permission of a more cursory nature? Are they making an informed choice, and can choice even exist where there may not be a balance of consequence? Issues of power and persuasion arise, as does the matter of normalisation. Since Alice has been using Instagram since 2012, this has been a part of her life and her family dynamic for the majority of her children’s lives. Is it possible that Alice’s use of Instagram has become part of the fabric of her family’s life, and thus normalised to the extent that it is seen as inevitable? We acknowledge these are speculative questions that cannot be answered without engaging in further dialogue with not only Alice, but her partner and children. Nonetheless, these themes of power, voice, and choice are important considerations in a broader sense – these points are re-examined in the recommendations section.

Alice also describes her Instagram as “very vanilla”, which is a conscious choice she has made. Alice avoids “conflict and controversy” as a rule, explaining:

The sharing of personal information is at a minimum, I don’t discuss my marriage or any private issues that my family experience. My account is really about sharing the good bits of our lives, the best bits. By rule, if I have a bad feeling about a photo or comment, if there’s a chance it will offend or provoke, I won’t post it.

It is interesting to note how Alice defines parameters between personal and public. While her Instagram tends to focus on the highlights of her family’s life (e.g. dance concerts, day trips, holidays) there are issues shared that are less idyllic and more private. For example, on four occasions during the data collection period, Alice posted about her children being sick. In each of these posts, focus tends to be placed on Alice’s experience of caring for her children with an emphasis on the labour and stress involved. Minimal focus is given to the children – in one, Alice mentions that her daughter missed a dance concert due to illness, and in another, she mentions that her daughter is glad to be resting. Still, the majority of Alice’s write-up emphasises her role and perspective. For instance, in a caption accompanying one of these posts, Alice reflects on the intensity of her week and confesses that “instead of feeling relief, I’m sh*t scared of the week that lays ahead”, which is followed by further laments about what she has been going through. This is not to say that Alice’s experiences and perspectives aren’t valid or valuable, and the comments left

by followers reflect that they relate to these posts. Nonetheless, it is worth examining the nature of these posts. Two of the four (see Figure 1) represent her sick children sleeping, which could be viewed as a personal and private moment. This raises the question of what rights children have to determine what aspect of their lives are preserved or lost (Cheeseman & Robertson, 2006). It also raises questions around where social media users draw the line in terms of private vs. public images.

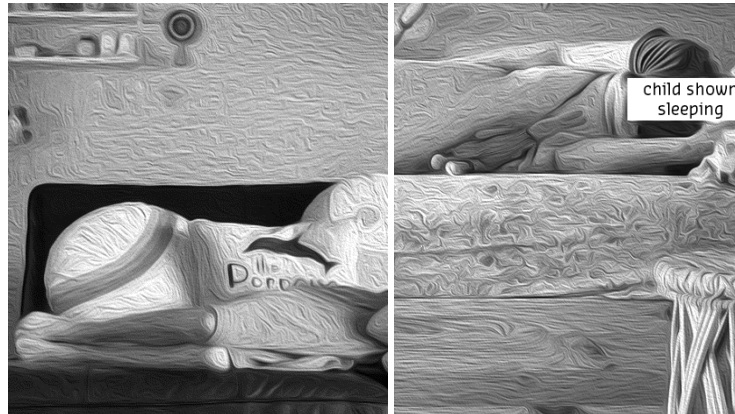


Figure 1: Two of the four posts focusing on the children being ill

“Pretty little squares”: Analysing the representation of children and family life

During the data collection period, Alice shared 35 posts on Instagram. These posts were analysed with an emphasis on the nature of representation of children and family life. The children form a strong focus point, as does Alice’s care for and organisation of their home. Other focus points include recommended products such as children’s books and home organisation products. As analysis progressed, issues around focus, voice, and purpose began to emerge.

In each post the ‘focus’ was examined. This involved analysing the photograph, caption, and tags and how they intersected to create an overall focal point. What emerged was that while focus tends to be shared in a narrative sense (either focusing on Alice’s experience or her perspective of her family’s experiences), the visual representations have a singular focus. Often, the children were the focus of the visual representations. For example, in Figure 2, two of Alice’s daughters are shown drawing. The caption does not reference this activity – instead, focus is placed on Alice’s experience. She writes, “I do a day’s work all before 8am – yet now I’m off to work.” This split is in keeping with many of Alice’s posts, where the visual representations of her children (or their work samples, play episodes, or bedrooms) are used as a vehicle for Alice’s narratives of parenthood.

This highlights the issue of voice, which permeated our analysis of Alice’s posts. While Alice’s children are often apparent in a visual sense, and sometimes apparent in a narrative sense, they are frequently rendered voiceless. A key example of this is in

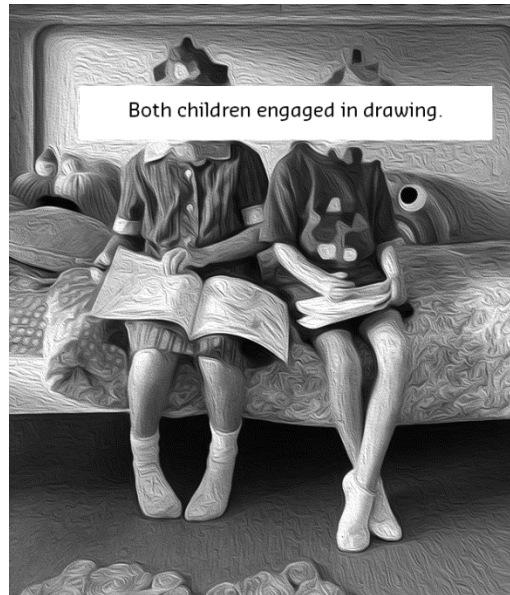


Figure 2: An example of a post with split focus

Figure 3, which depicts one of Alice's daughters after a dance concert, smiling with pride and with half of her stage make-up smudged. Alice's caption references the smudged make-up, where she uses this as an analogy: "This doll's performance can be likened to her left eye there, sweet and perfect. While my dance mum performance can be likened to the eye on the right – smudged as hell." Alice goes on to reflect that the dance concert "sure did hammer [Alice]" and that she "need[s] to lay down."



Figure 3: An example of a post where the child is rendered voiceless

Other than referencing the make-up, Alice only observes that her daughter's performance was "cute" – there is no inclusion of her daughter's perspective regarding her participation in the concert.

Here arises a tension: the visual of the child is engaging and draws the viewer in to a narrative that is solely her mother's. Alice deems her daughter's performance "sweet", "perfect", and "cute", but we know nothing of the child's own point of view. Alice states her participation in this event was intense and tiring, but offers no insight into the child's experience. And yet, the child is positioned as a poster-girl for the narrative at hand. She is – with the exception of her partially smudged make-up – idealised through her mother's lens as a "doll." It is interesting to note the language that Alice uses here - she speaks of her child's performance with affection and admiration, but this seems to be focused on aesthetic dimensions. Functional dimensions (e.g. recognising her child's effort, personal enjoyment or capability) are not acknowledged. This goes to the image of child apparent in Alice's posts, further explored in this section.

Another key theme that arose through the analysis was the inherent purpose of the posts. Many posts included promotional content (n=24) – sometimes overt, with products clearly on display and companies explicitly identified (n=10), while other posts were more covert (n=14). The covert posts often appeared, at the outset, personal in nature with focus afforded to Alice and her activities and/or those of her children – but a deeper look revealed that brands were tagged, or discount codes for online shopping were offered. During the data collection period, we were able to capture one story posted by Alice which featured a photo of one of her children drawing, but the text overlaid focused on a promotion where her followers could win a voucher from another Instagram account. Included within the covert promotional posts were those shared in Figure 1, where the children were depicted resting while unwell. In these posts, products such as the children's clothes or home décor are tagged. Whether or not this is a paid promotion is not apparent, but this way of engaging with companies on Instagram is often advantageous for users – their posts may be shared or the company may choose to offer gifts or paid partnerships. Returning to the issue of private vs. public and where boundaries are drawn, the tensions are heightened by the tagging of companies. It also raises questions regarding the children consenting to these photos being shared. Are the children aware that the photos, when shared, include these tags? Are they conscious of the commodification of their personal moments? If not, does this compromise their approval of the photos being shared, or render the approval invalid?

Curiosities arose as the manner of the representation of Alice's children in these posts was examined. When the children were featured in posts that included promotional content, they were often used as visual bait – much like in the post depicted in Figure 3, the children were represented in ways that are visually engaging, with the post ultimately giving way to Alice's perspective and experience, and then featuring promotional content. Examples of such posts are included in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Examples of promotional posts where the children are featured as visual bait

With regards to the first photo featured in Figure 4, the only immediate visual evidence of the post being promotional is a brand logo on the child's hat (pixelated here to preserve privacy). The caption goes on to explain that Alice engaged her child in an activity with details given as to the products used and where they could be sourced. This photo is one of four featured in the post – two others are solely of products, and one other features the child engaged in the activity surrounded by products. Each photo includes tags of the brand and an outlet. It is interesting to note that not only does the child act as poster-girl for the promotion of the product, but that the activity in which she is engaged is bound up in promotional intent and may be an activity that the child may not have normally engaged in.

The second photo featured in Figure 4 contains mixed messages. At first glance the viewer sees a child embracing one of her dolls. The accompanying caption offers information on the child's relationship to this doll and their play episodes. It focuses primarily on the doll's garments which were gifted to Alice and the companies involved being tagged and promoted. This photo is one of two included in the post – the second is shown in Figure 5 (left). In both photos, the child is cropped leaving only sections of her body shown and her face obscured – practices argued to be objectifying (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In the second photo, the child is out of focus and essentially the backdrop, while the promoted products are foregrounded. In such representations, the children seem objectified in a way that renders them as decorative features rather than as subjects or agents. This contrasts to the image of children acknowledged in ECEC research and literature. Furthermore, in all of the captions accompanying the photos shown in Figures 4 and 5, focus is placed only on the products and Alice's view of them, with minimal mention of her perception of her children's engagement with the products. For instance, she positions her child as "mischievous" – but this is only conveyed from her point of view, and is only made apparent within the caption. The child's mischievousness is not captured in a visual sense; instead, the child is still and faceless.

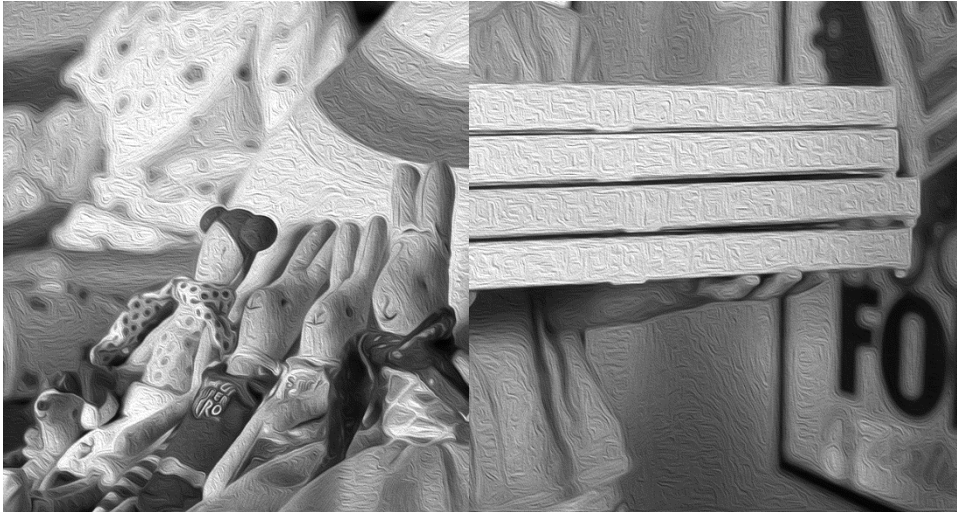


Figure 5: Examples of posts where the children are segmented/objectified

Alice's promotional posts are grounded in demand. In posts that focus on other matters, her followers often comment requesting information about where Alice purchased a certain item of clothing or a particular homeware. They also engage enthusiastically with promotional posts, with conversations unfolding about the products shown or where followers request or contribute advice and inspiration. As we explored these posts, we could understand why Alice produces this type of content, given the levels of engagement from her followers and the possible advantages (e.g. being gifted merchandise for herself and/or her children). Still, tensions and complexities around the children's place become evident. What are their rights? To what extent do they understand the context in which they are situated? Are they comfortable being depicted as though they were props or backdrops used to promote a product? These are questions that merit exploration and conversation, explored later in this paper.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that many of Alice's posts did not feature her children at all. She also shared photographs of the family home, or the children's playthings, or her baking. This expands how she represents her experiences of parenthood and family life in a holistic sense. Importantly, it needs to be noted that the motivation for her posting these other dimensions of her life is connected to her children and their choices. In a caption accompanying a photograph of Alice's baking, she writes:

I remember one of my besties saying, "What the hell will we post about when our kids have grown up?" And I was like, "Pffft, that will never happen!" Hmmm, lookie here, all four kids are now in full-time school and wow, Instagram sure is a struggle. Had someone told me that my feed would one day predominantly feature baking, I would have wet myself a little

laughing. Yet, here we are, and even I’m bored! Time flies, kids grow up, solo mums start baking obsessively – these things happen, people!

Alice’s claim that her feed is predominantly focused on baking is not representative of the month of data collection, where only 10 posts focused on baking while 25 had another focus (either her children, her home, and/or products). But, nonetheless, this is an intriguing point she raises. Because her children are now school-aged, it is less possible and perhaps less convenient to represent them as frequently as she may have in the past. Further insights regarding this development come to light in this interaction between a follower (named Anna here) and Alice:

Anna: I reckon the struggle with taking photos of the kids when they are older is they start to make a really derpy face when they know you are photographing them. A bit like myself, really!

Alice: Absolutely! It’s not that we don’t have photo ops – it’s that the kids aren’t keen or they sure make it hard!

This may explain why in many photos, promotional or otherwise, the children are faceless (n=11). The exchange between the follower and Alice raises a point about their image (or lack of consideration) of child agency and their main focus on posting particular types of visual images that have resulted in representing only a small sliver of the full capabilities of children. Anna describes taking photos of older children as a “struggle”, which is echoed by Alice who says the children “make it hard.” Anna’s observation about children making “a really derpy face” is problematic not only in the use of ableist language, but raises significant issues around children’s self-consciousness. As we explored Alice’s caption and the subsequent dialogue, key questions arose. Do children only deserve representation when they are “sweet and perfect” (e.g. Figure 1)? Are patterns of representing children bound up in their ages and stages - is it easier and more convenient when they are younger? Are the earlier years of children’s lives idealised, and if so, what ideology underpins this idealisation?

Lastly, it is interesting to note that Anna relates her children’s participation in taking photos to her own experience. It is likely that many adults can relate to feelings of self-consciousness when being photographed or videoed. Perhaps this is the basis for critical reflection and conversation: How would adults feel, if they were in the same position as these children? Would the situation feel safe and comfortable? Or would they feel a discomforting sense of self-consciousness? If adults were asked to dwell on these feelings, would they be able to relate to children and use the resulting insight to guide their online interactions with them? These questions, and many others, will be further explored and unpacked in our final section focusing on recommendations.

Recommendations

Alice’s Instagram represents a dimension of her family and children’s lives, but what is critical to note is that this representation is positioned through a particular lens – and that lens is predominantly Alice’s. Her children’s perspectives and own representations of their

lives are absent in Alice's posts. It is worth noting the frequent imbalance inherent in her posts, i.e. that the visuals often feature her children, but the caption shifts focus towards Alice. The importance of this is well-stated by Edkins (2013, p. 141), who wrote that in the presence of a caption,

The image does not often stand alone. The caption pins the photograph down, limiting, or colouring our interpretation of its meaning, taming it. It inserts the image into a textual milieu and demands it be understood in those terms.

So, while many of Alice's photographs centre around her children and their lives, the narratives put forth in her captions where her perspectives and experiences are privileged, prove definitive.

The image of the child apparent on Alice's Instagram at times seems strong. Themes of playfulness and capability arise, with focus given to how her children engage collaboratively or imaginatively in play episodes. Still, this hinges on Alice's point of view. Quotes from her children or photos taken by her children do not feature, thus rendering the children voiceless in stories about them and their lives. The consequences of children having no or limited agency over their own representation are potentially long-term (Leaver, 2017) – this is an issue with significance for children and the adults with influence over their lives, including parents, family members, and educators.

After engaging in an in-depth and multi-faceted analysis of Alice's Instagram posts, a very different image of the child to the one embraced in ECEC was uncovered. Though at times playful and capable, more often, children were positioned as still, passive, objectified, and commodified. This image is embedded in representations that Alice's children consented to, but that consent merits critical examination in terms of the power dynamics at play and the extent to which 'choice' is truly possible.

Alice's Instagram, now seven years old and populated with nearly 10,000 posts, is a treasure trove of memories of her family's life. It is clearly precious to Alice and her followers, and we recognise and respect why this is so – it is a space for memory-making, self-representation, inspiration, and connection. There is value in this, for Alice and her followers alike. We wonder, though, what value this holds to Alice's children. Since they were not interviewed for this project, it is not possible to say how they perceive Alice's Instagram or how they feel about it.

From an overarching sense, further research is required about how children relate to their parents' social media presence and to what extent are they aware of it, and how deeply they understand it? What place does it hold in their minds and hearts? As researchers we question the level of exposure children have to their parents' Instagram accounts (or similar) and are intrigued by the nature of this exposure. We wonder what feelings it provokes, what it might contribute to young children's self-image and identity development, and how it might influence the wider community's view and attitude to children. We wonder whether these issues are a consideration for parents. If it isn't, we would argue it *should* be. If we consider childhood through an ethical lens, one which is

underpinned by a strong image of children as citizens with agency, and an appreciation of their rights, then it is imperative that the views and voices of children be taken into account.

Furthermore, it is worth considering the possible consequences of children being exposed only to images that are curated and reflect an idealised image of themselves, and their lives, and whether the regular feedback of an objectified image of themselves influences how they view themselves. Research has explored the risks related to exposure to and engagement with objectifying media (e.g. Davis, 2018; Feltman & Szymaski, 2018). We question what it means to be a child growing up with so many, easily accessible images of themselves, and consider this an area of significance for future research.

Critical reflection by educators and families about the ways in which they represent children and how they relate to children in this process must be made. To inform this critical reflection, we have provided a number of provocations and recommendations: <http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/image-child-re-imagined-instagram/> (Dobson & Jay, 2019) [see Appendix 2].

By embracing these provocations and recommendations, educators and families can work together to engage children in their own representation, and hopefully reach a shared and nuanced appreciation of the image of the child.

Conclusion

This paper has explored one influencer parent's relationship with Instagram and her use of it to represent her children and their family life. Issues around children's rights have been discussed and deserve continued examination. The question of how visual representations of children influence different spheres of contemporary life must be explored. We encourage children, families, and educators to enter into sustained dialogue around their participation in social media contexts where each has an authentic choice about how they are represented and can be confident their voice is respected.

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Appendix 1

- Can you tell us about yourself and your family?
- When did you start using Instagram? What motivated you to do so?
- Has your Instagram account changed over time in terms of content, focus, etc.? If so, how so?
- What are the things you like best about Instagram?

- Do you have any other social media accounts (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)? If so, how are they similar or different to your Instagram?
- Are your immediate family members aware of your Instagram and what you post?
- When taking photos to share on Instagram, what is your process? How do you decide what photos to take and share?
- Are your posts spontaneous, planned, or a mix of both?
- On average, when you take photos to share on Instagram, how many versions of that photo do you take?
- What do you look for in the photos you choose to share?
- Do your children help with making decisions about the photos being taken and shared? If so, how so?
- Do you have any personal rules for what you will/won't post? If so, how did you determine these rules?
- Who would you say has the most creative control over your Instagram?
- Overall, what does your Instagram mean to you? Is there anything else you would like to share? (e.g. further information you would like us to know about, any questions/feedback about the study)

Appendix 2

Provocations regarding the representation of children on Instagram

- Is the child aware of what Instagram is? Do they understand that their image may be publicly available?
- How involved is the child in their own representation? Are they given the opportunity to contribute feedback, veto unwanted photos/videos, or help write the caption? Is their personality and voice present in their own representation?
- Is the child's image captured during a private moment (e.g. while they bathe or sleep)? How would we as adults feel if the same happened to us? Does the child have a say in whether these photos/videos are shared?
- Is the child represented in a way that may seem stereotypical, idealised, or objectified? What might this communicate to followers?

Recommendations for educators communicating with families about the image of the child

- Hold in mind an appreciation of what social media may mean to families. For example, many parents treasure their Instagram accounts and cherish the opportunity for self-expression and connection to others. You may like to begin dialogue with families around what social media means to them and its presence and significance in their lives.
- Engage in respectful dialogue around their children and their connectedness to social media. Are the children aware of what Instagram is, what purpose it serves, and its features? For example, are they aware that their image may be shared with an audience of hundreds, thousands, or more?

- Invite families to consider sharing the experience with their children by seeking their input on the creation of photos/videos and whether they will be shared and, if so, how. How can the child contribute to their own representation? How can we support them to have voice and choice in this context?

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