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The Discursive Construction of ‘Good Parenting’ by Romanian Parenting Influencers

Abstract

This article analyzes promotional and educational content published online by newly emerged parenting influencers in Romania to endorse parenting education programs, workshops, seminars, or books. The paper aims to investigate how these programs construct ‘good parenting’ practices at a discursive level, what (de)legitimation strategies they use to promote products or services, and how they shape power relations between experts and parents. The study uses a multidimensional thematic, critical, and pragmatic discourse analysis approach. The results show that, through discursive strategies, influencers portray ‘good parenting’ as an anxiety and value-driven process. This approach is rooted in a parental determinist view that emphasizes the influence of parental actions on children’s health and well-being. On the other hand, parenting expert influencers depict the ‘good parent’ as a ‘conscious parent’ (a parent that is both child-conscious, and attentive to their own needs and emotions) who should reform old parenting practices to ensure a secure relationship with their children and correct old parenting mistakes. The paper contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the changing nature of parental culture in post-industrial countries, with a particular focus on Romania.

Keywords: CDA, parenting discourse, legitimization, influencers, Romania

Introduction

Becoming a parent is a transformative life experience that brings a lot of responsibility and social pressure. In post-industrial societies, all aspects of parenthood, such as the best way to give birth, feeding the newborn and later the child, parenting style, parental leave and access to childcare facilities, or the equal sharing of parental responsibilities, regularly generate heated public debates. Having a child is a personal and private as well as a communal experience that places new parents at the center of a plethora of parenting advice ranging from lay or traditional views of childrearing to scientifically based approaches aimed at achieving positive developmental outcomes in children (Smith, Perou & Lesesne, 2002).

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This has led to the creation of parenting programs sponsored by public and private institutions and to the emergence of parenting experts such as psychologists, physicians, educators, facilitators, coaches, trainers, or influencers. All these experts seek to ease the transition to parenthood and provide parents with the best advice to raise their children to become well-adjusted adults capable of adding value to society.

Previous research in this area (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Shpakovskaya & Chernova, 2016) has explained the emergence of such trends in terms of broader changes in post-industrial societies, such as the increasing process of individualization, globalization, the rise of reflexive modernity, the rise of neoliberalism, and risk culture (Furedi, 2002; Lee *et al.*, 2014). Society no longer sees parenting as naturally determined by social practice, as Shpakovskaya and Chernova (2016) argue.

To raise well-adjusted individuals who can cope with the uncertainty of the risk society (Beck, 1992) or the challenges of the fourth industrial revolution (Skilton & Hovsepian, 2018) and the emergence of artificial intelligence, it is necessary that parents acquire expertise, deconstruct and reform old concepts of parenting. This opens the door to a new field of parenting advice based on expert knowledge rather than lay advice or ‘folk wisdom’.

At the same time, some studies show that becoming a parent, and specifically a mother, brings a growing feeling of isolation and disconnection from one’s prior identity and preoccupations (Thomson & Kehily, 2011; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015; Seymour-Smith *et al.*, 2017). Changes that come with women’s increased participation in work and education (Thomson & Kehily, 2011), late motherhood, and workforce mobility, which leads to the fragmentation of the multigenerational family, and the growing care gap (Hochschild, 2003) contribute to this feeling of disconnection by leaving new parents, and more specifically new mothers, disoriented in this disrupting life transition.

Similarly, the emergence of double-income families, the spread of single parenting or co-parenting practices, adoptive and same-sex families make it necessary for parents to access specialized parental education to balance the growing demands of work and family life. The emergence of these needs can also be explained by the change in the way parenthood is constructed discursively in post-industrial societies, with a growing emphasis on the role of the parent in the life of the child (e.g., Cottam & Espie, 2014; Lee, 2014).

This new trend shifts the power relations between experts and parents and renews dominant parenting discourses. As a result, we are facing a process of professionalization of parenting practices (Allen & Hudd, 1987; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Shpakovskaya & Chernova, 2016), where “knowledge about parenting becomes a complex cognitive and ideological field in which various types of expert knowledge coexist and conflict with ordinary ‘folk’ ideas about caring for a child” (Shpakovskaya & Chernova, 2016, p. 522). Even though the term professionalization should be understood metaphorically in the context of parenting, it precisely describes this new tendency of parents to rely on the advice of experts in their parenting decisions. It also cultivates new discursive categories: the educated parent (Sclafani, 2004), the authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, or neglectful parent (Baumrind, 1967; Maccoby & Martin, 1983), the helicopter parent (Ginott, 1969), or the tiger mom (Chua, 2011).

Although following expert parenting advice is not a new trend, the topic is relevant with the emergence of social media as it becomes the subject of commodification (Ball, 2004). According to Industry Global News24 (2022), the global online parenting market was valued at US\$ 6,671.87 in 2021. This market offers products such as parenting apps, podcasts, training programs and seminars, printed and electronic books, coaching programs, baby and child

equipment, and pregnancy gear, to name only a few. According to askwonder.com “millennial moms spend \$231.6 million on parenting books and \$141 million on parenting apps annually”. Parenting is also considered and recommended by social media experts as one of the most profitable topics to provide revenue (Carmicheal, 2022; Hanorth, 2023; Razo, 2023).

Thus, parenting advice is no longer a culturally infused and geographically determined family practice but a monetized one. It is also the subject of discursive constructions aimed at promoting and legitimizing different/ competing parenting approaches or experts. Parenting has also become a subject of public policy as political authorities in several states across Europe and the world initiate policies “to support parents in their task of educating, caring for and socializing their children” (Martin, 2017, p. 303). There are parenting education programs funded by the state (Cottam & Espie, 2014; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014) as well as state-sanctioned parental education strategies (e.g., The Romanian *National Strategy for Parental Education* “*Educated Parents, Happy Children*,” 2022).

This article focuses on the discourses of emerging parenting experts in Romania. Previous research regarding changing parenting cultures in post-industrial societies did not focus on the voice of social media expert influencers and their impact on shaping the way parenting is understood and practiced, and, therefore, this paper aims to fill in this gap in the literature. Furthermore, this study offers an exploration of the Romanian parenting culture, which is less investigated in the specialized literature. The study aims to examine how these experts construct ‘good parenting’ practices at a discursive level, which (de)legitimization strategies are used to promote their products or services, and how power relations between experts and parents are shaped. While previous studies have focused on the parenting discourse practiced in state-funded parenting programs (Cottam & Espie, 2014), NGO-initiated parental education programs (Vlasă, 2009; Cojocaru, Cojocaru & Ciuchi, 2011; Cojocaru & Cojocaru 2011a), parenting books (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2016), mommy influencer blogs (Ouvrein, 2022; Scheibling & Milkie, 2022), mommy influencers on social media (Beuckels & De Jans, 2022; Jorge *et al.*, 2022), or parenting advice shared on social media platforms (Bîră, Buzoianu & Tudorie, 2020; Bailey 2023; Zayts-Spence, Tse, & Fortune, 2023), the present paper uses a different approach by focusing on the discourse of parenting expert influencers.

Specifically, this study seeks to explore how a specific type of discourse, namely promotional content published on social media to endorse parenting education programs, workshops, seminars, or books, contributes to a redefinition of parenting and parental roles in the Romanian society. Parenting experts use several discursive strategies to assume a position of power with parents and shape how they understand childhood needs and their role in the parenting process. They are further supported by an ecosystem of online parenting websites, traditional media, event organizers, or fellow influencers who legitimize their position and provide arenas of visibility for their discourse. As a result, their definitions of parenting can potentially foster new social practices and impact the way Romanian parents organize their lives and define their role in their children’s lives.

Anchored in the poststructuralist tradition in discourse analysis (Foucault, 1991), the paper contributes to the growing body of knowledge on changing parental culture in post-industrial countries, focusing on Romania. It reveals how power relations are negotiated through discourse and the (de)legitimization strategies (Van Leeuwen, 2007) used to support new discursive constructions and practical approaches to parenting by a specific category of parenting experts, active in social media.

It takes a (virtual) village to raise a child

Parents traditionally received guidance and support on childrearing from family and friends. Up until recently, parenting has had mainly an empirical approach based on trial and error (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011a). However, with the changes in post-industrial societies and the medicalization of childbirth, parenting advice has also become the prerogative of experts. This has created the premises for the professionalization of parenting. According to Cojocaru and Cojocaru (2011b), the emergence of parenting education in the medical field began with the publication of the book *Baby and Child Care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock in 1946. This book has influenced several generations of parents around the world, including from Romania, where a translated version has been in circulation since the late 2000s.

Given the political, social, and economic changes in contemporary societies and the rising pressure on parents to adequately respond to child upbringing, parenting advice has been assimilated by the logic of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2008) and promotion. With the advent of the digital era, parental guidance and support can be found online as well (Moon et al., 2019), on social media, streaming platforms (in the form of podcasts), or on smartphone parenting apps. New media came as compensation for the growing distance between family members, both geographically and in terms of worldviews. The proverbial ‘village’ that used to help with child upbringing has been replaced or extended by the ‘virtual’ village. In this context, several practices emerged: mummy blogging or ‘sharenting’ (Jorge et al., 2022), the creation of online forums and social media groups where peer support is offered, and parenting information is shared (Bîră, Buzoianu & Tudorie, 2020; Bailey 2023; Zayts-Spence, Tse, & Fortune, 2023), or the emergence of parenting expert influencers who promote parental education programs or books online, through social media.

These practices are deemed useful for parents as they make parenting information more accessible, facilitate the exchange of information and guidance or create a space for public discussion on the experience of raising a child. Online platforms can also contribute to the organization of offline support groups or the facilitation of technology-mediated social support via social media (Haslam, Teel & Baker, 2017; Bîră, Buzoianu & Tudorie, 2020).

The availability of multiple opinions might ease the parenting decision-making process by indicating the general agreement of peers and specialists on a problematic topic (Moon et al., 2019). The opportunity for shared experiences and the non-judgmental setting needed by such an exchange has not been replicated by many other means of communication. Lastly, practices such as mummy blogging have launched alternative and more relatable narratives of motherhood by conveying a different story from the glamorized picture of motherhood in the mainstream media (Hunter, 2016).

However, the emergence of the ‘virtual’ village also has its pitfalls since it places much social pressure on new parents. Online parenting advice promotes hard-to-reach standards with little social, psychological, and economic support. At the same time, the authenticity of parenting experiences shared online through blogging has been threatened by the monetization of mummy blogs and the commodification of their audiences (Hunter, 2016). Additionally, when mothers compare themselves to mommy influencers, their perceived parental self-efficacy lowers (Ouvrein, 2022). Lastly, the superficial and transitory nature of online interactions makes them complementary to real-world ones rather than replacing them (O’Connor & Madge, 2010).

When particularizing the discussion on parenting discourses promoted by social media influencers, one cannot oversee the mixing of promotional and marketing techniques with parenting advice, or, in other words, of strategic and commercial communication with discourses of social values. According to Hudders and collaborators (2021), there are two characteristics that define a social media influencer: reach and impact. The first refers to having a large follower base, which ensures that the messages shared have the potential of reaching even larger number of people. The second refers to the impact an influencer has over their followers' decision-making process. In order to reach these goals, the influencers must combine expertise, authenticity, and intimacy; they must build compelling narratives and use storytelling techniques, create intricate communication and publishing strategies to maximize reach.

As Sedda and Husson (2023) note, such influencers combine the need to enact authenticity with the promotional nature of online communication, meant to achieve quantitative performance in the 'platform economy'. Therefore, scholars investigating parenting discourses promoted by these emerging experts should aim to clarify the value such discourses bring to the field of parenting, as well as their distinctiveness compared to other parenting professionals.

Neoliberalism, parental determinism, and the 'professionalization' of parenting

According to Furedi (2002), the way we understand parenting today results from a shift in views regarding the impact of adult action on child development. This shift happened in the 19th century with the transition from agricultural societies to the new manufacturing process specific to the industrial revolution. In agricultural societies, adults expected children to work alongside the family or the community and did not offer special attention to their upbringing – they were preoccupied with basic childrearing. Starting in the 19th century children were gradually extracted from the workforce, and parents became more interested in their education. This created the basis for a new world of parenting views.

Another turning point happened with the advent of neoliberalism and globalization. Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014) argue that contemporary shifts in parenting arise from the importance neoliberal states place on education, which can determine a country's position in the global economy. Emergent forms of education address individual subjects and the context in which future generations of citizens are formed. Through parental education programs aimed at parents, the state expands its reach into what was previously considered predominantly a family responsibility. Such programs also promote state and expert control over parents, a trend called by Cojocaru and Cojocaru (2011c) 'the deprivatization of families.'

According to Lee (2014), such shifts can also be explained through the term 'parental determinism', a worldview in which children's 'health' or 'well-being' outcomes are directly related to what parents do. Under this umbrella, we can place practices such as 'intense mothering' (Hays, 1996; Ennis, 2014), 'paranoid parenting' (Furedi, 2002), or 'concerted cultivation' (Laurneau, 2011). To understand parental determinism, Lee (2014), inspired by Furedi (2002), introduces the idea of 'risk consciousness' as the basis for contemporary parenting discourses.

With the rise of modernity, risk (which in the past had a neutral meaning, pointing towards certain possible losses or gains) has been associated, with negative or undesirable outcomes. In the case of parenting, risks can emerge from the type of behavior a mother has throughout her pregnancy, her birth option and baby feeding choice, not meeting the basic

needs of the baby or child, or parental violence, to name but a few. These risks promote generalized anxiety, which feeds different ideological discourses seeking to correct any implicit 'parental incompetence' (Lee, 2014) or lack of knowledge.

As Furedi (2002) notes, the traditional meaning of good parenting was to nurture, stimulate and socialize children. Moreover, the daily parenting practice also consists of contextual knowledge derived from cultural stereotypes and ethnic and class beliefs. Parental deterministic views and expert discourse, however, subtract individuals from their context and geographies, giving them full responsibility for their becoming (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). One of the main criticisms of deterministic views in parenting in the Western world is that 'they impose middle-class mores on working-class parents' (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014, p. 94; see also Laureau, 2011).

Consequently, parenting becomes a context-free skill which adds a growing pressure for parents to perform and provide the best education to their children, regardless of their background. With the import of Western parenting practices and values by other developing countries, such as Romania, the discussion shifts from class-related discrepancies to cultural, social, and economic variations. These practices can influence not only how parenting is practiced and understood in their original countries by representatives of various social classes but in other parts of the world, disregarding the differences in economic power, culture, and education of parents. Many contradictions and limitations of these ideas might emerge, and much disorientation on the part of the parents.

The many facets of the professionalization of parenting

The professional approach to parenting and the growing role of experts in shaping parental approaches have led to the reshaping of the way parents define their identities, organize their lives, and see their children. A longitudinal study published in 2016 by Dotti Sani and Treas has shown that, despite the spread of double-income families, the overall time spent by parents in Western countries with their children has increased in the 1965-2012 timeframe. These results echo other studies conducted in the U.S. on the same topic (Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001; Sayer, Bianchi & Robinson, 2004).

This means that albeit more women have joined the workforce, and parents' lives have become more demanding, they still invest more time and money in their children. This approach is also called 'intensive parenting' (Lee et al., 2014). Over the centuries, the view over childhood has changed to the point that today children are seen as vulnerable and exposed to risk and need constant adult guidance and supervision. Moreover, an 'infant deterministic' (Furedi, 2002) view has emerged, which emphasizes the impact of infant experience over adult life and the importance of the time spent by parents with their children.

Studies that explicitly address the professionalization of parenting have shown that this trend can manifest itself in many ways worldwide, bringing new definitions for parenting and motherhood. Examining parenting training programs (PTPs) in Great Britain, Cottam and Espie (2014) identify different types of discourses that are meant to structure power relations between parents and experts in favor of the latter, thus encouraging the trend of parenting professionalization. These discourses are victimhood (which stresses the victim status of parents and children, who need the advice of specialists to adjust their relationship better), institutional salvation (which emphasizes the power of the state through PTPs to mend parent-child

relationships), scientism (which favors science-based solutions and recipes to solve parenting challenges) and collaboration (which is characterized by respect and compassion between parents, children, and parenting support professionals). Such an approach to parenting takes away the agency of parents and children and is aimed at reshaping the way parenting is understood and practiced.

In their study of popular parenting books in Russia, Chernova, and Shpakovskaya (2016) identify three types of parenting professionalization: based on individual experience – such books encourage parents to go beyond the normative views of experts and find their own style of parenting guided by their relationship with their children, and their specific needs; based on expert knowledge – such books are tributary to the medicalization of childbirth, which created normative parenting advice, that is considered universal and does not differentiate between child genders or personalities; based on expert advice and individual parenting experience – such discourses encourage parents to combine expert advice for organizing proper care with the individual needs of children and their families. Using this lens to look at professionalization, one can observe that expert advice is not always homogenous, which leaves plenty of room for individual interpretation and a particularized application of such guidance.

Jorge and collaborators (2022) investigate professional sharenting on social media by 11 family influencers in Portugal in the post-austerity years (beginning with 2015) marked by low salaries, an unstable job market, and housing crises. The study reveals that mummy influencers “reproduce a postfeminist, neoliberal culture (...) by positioning themselves as successful yet struggling people” (p. 178) to be perceived as relatable. At the same time, the authors depict social media visibility as an opportunity for mothers, omitting the conditions for access in this medium, which entails specialized skills in marketing, design, media, and journalism.

Furthermore, these scholars emphasize the importance of self-care to face maternal emotional labor by supporting self-care industries in reaching female targets. Finally, by promoting consumption, they create a “social construction of motherhood where the emotional and material are intertwined” (p. 178). This study shows how the professionalization of parenting can bring new facets to maternity and reshape discourses about needs, by emphasizing the importance of self-care for mothers. The paper also shows how social media creates new ways of performing motherhood by offering a platform for professional reorientation while being a mother, blurring the boundaries between private and public.

The professionalization of parenting in Romania shows the intertwining of soft skills, with the practice correction approach. This trend was addressed in the specialized literature mainly in relation to parental education programs funded by NGOs and international organizations, such as UNICEF (e.g., Cojocaru, Cojocaru & Ciuchi, 2011; Cojocaru & Cojocaru 2011a). Cojocaru and Cojocaru (2011b) argue that parental education in Romania began to develop at the end of the 1990s, with the implementation of the first programs inspired by international models. Such programs typically target adoptive families, parents of children with disabilities, families in rural areas or from disadvantaged populations, and social service workers. They focus on “the transfer of knowledge and skills from specialists towards parents, with the purpose of making the intervention on the child permanent, in compliance with the prescriptions of the ideology of children’s rights” (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011c, p. 212). The dissemination of such programs was also supported by governmental and private institutions.

Such an approach brings another facet to the trend of professionalization of parenting, as it is meant to address and correct specific issues in the Romanian society. A study released by Save the Children Romania (2022) revealed that “one out of two children is subjected to

some form of abuse, 41.5% of children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the highest rate in the EU. Lastly, 45% of girls under 15 years old who became mothers in the EU states come from Romania” (p.1).

In addition to the NGO initiated and policy driven professionalization, this tendency is also a response to a growing need of younger parents to reconfigure old parenting roles, under the impact of international trends. In 2005, a popular television show was released, *Supernanny*, by PrimaTV, a private television channel in Romania (Diura, 2023). The show is inspired by its British and American versions and aims to provide practical solutions to parents struggling with the daily challenges of parenthood. There has also been an increase in demand from the Romanian parents for educational programs directed at them (ProTV, 2019). More parenting blogs and social media pages appeared, most of them being run by women who are also mothers (Recenziidetop.ro, 2023) who promote new and science-based approaches to parenting.

A netnographic study conducted by Bira, Buzoianu and Tudorie in 2020 on a popular social media community of mothers in Romania shows a growing need of new mothers to embody a different definition of mothering by turning away from the older models offered by their parents, and manifesting interest in newer trends in parenting, lifestyle, health, and self-help. As the authors put it, “a good mother not only wants to identify and care for all psychological needs of her children but pays attention to her own needs” (p. 69). Such shifts create a different context for the professionalization of parenting, more specifically of mothering, by encouraging the premises for a specific type of professionalization, namely the emergence of new parenting professionals (coaches, psychologists, trainers, etc.). To gain recognition as experts, these influencers aim to access internationally recognized certifications, from emerging parenting institutes.

Consequently, the professionalization of parenting has a twofold meaning, as it impacts both parents – who need to perfect their abilities to best care for their children; and experts, as it leads to the creation of new categories of professionals and professional institutes that further specialize the field. Lastly, for parents, professionalization has an extrinsic manifestation, as it is initiated by institutions, experts, or peers, and directed at them. Furthermore, it has and an intrinsic component, as well, being a result of the internal need of parents to reform old parenting practices, which is responded to by emerging professionals.

Methodology

This research proposes an empirical investigation of content published online by emerging parenting influencers in Romania to promote parenting education programs, workshops, seminars, or books. The objectives of the paper are to investigate how these influencers construct ‘good parenting’ practices in the Romanian context, which (de)legitimization strategies are used by such experts to promote their products or services, and how power relations between experts and parents are shaped based on the discursive identities assigned to experts, parents, and children. Therefore, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Romanian parenting influencers construct ‘good parenting’ practices at a discursive level?

With this research question, I am interested in finding: a. the main topics addressed by parenting influencers in their discourse; b. the characteristics they associate with ‘good parent-

ing'; how the role of the expert is being constructed discursively in this process; and c. which are the main expected outcomes of practicing 'good parenting'. The working definition of discourse, used in this paper is the one provided by Beciu (2011): "the way in which a social actor uses language, as well as other communication resources to build a «point of view» or a «position» in relation to what is being communicated and in relation to the interlocutors" (p. 31). Discourse is also seen as both an individual practice (underlying the specificities of the speaker – in this case, the parenting social media influencer), and a social practice (as it reflects the communicational rules of a field – in this case, contemporary parenting ethos and knowledge; it is culturally and socially loaded – in this case, it operates with culturally loaded examples; and it reflects the constraint and rules of specific communicational situations – in this case, social media communication, which inclines toward authenticity and intimacy).

I am particularly interested in finding if 'good parenting' outcomes are explicitly formulated and defined, and which is the reason experts invoke for parents to find the motivation to follow their advice and participate in their programs. I am also interested in analyzing the discursive strategies influencers use to convey their parenting advice – enunciation strategies, and types of language (cf. Beciu, 2011). Such an approach is important to determine how parenting influencers in Romania define parenthood and the importance of parental education in obtaining the best outcomes for their children.

RQ2. How do Romanian parenting influencers (de) legitimize different parenting approaches?

The second research question extends the discussion started with RQ1, by looking at the most common legitimation techniques used by Romanian parenting influencers to legitimize their views and programs. As such, I will base my analysis on the discourse analysis framework created by Van Leeuwen (2007), regarding legitimation strategies used in discourse and communication. The analysis will be guided by the characteristics of the four legitimation strategies identified by Van Leeuwen: 'authorization' – references made to the authority of tradition, custom, and law, or invoking persons who hold institutional authority; 'moral evaluation' – using discourses of value to provide legitimation; 'rationalization' – actions are legitimized by reference to their goals and uses, as well as the social knowledge that renders them cognitively valid; and 'mythopoesis' – using narratives that reward legitimate actions and punishing illegal ones. I will also examine emergent strategies used by influencers to justify their role and the validity of their parenting approach.

RQ3. How do Romanian parenting influencers discursively construct identities for themselves, the parents they address, and their children, and how this shapes power relations between experts and the parents they address?

To this end, I will use the discourse analysis framework set up by Beciu (2011), according to whom discursive identities are indicative of the positioning of the speaker in the process of communication and emerge from the symbolic rules of the communicational context: a type of language that is expected to be used, a previously established way of addressing the interlocutor, tackling a certain set of arguments and topics that are expected to be discussed in relation to the problem at hand. A second source for identity creation is through examining the way the speaker stays in line with the discursive identity they have created for themselves throughout the years. Given the novelty of this type of discourse – belonging to 'expert' parenting influencers – and the lack of studies that address it, the present research will work

with a set of indicators regarding the expected components of parenting discourse identified by previous research (Cottam & Espie, 2014; Shpakovskaya & Chernova, 2016), but will also look for emergent ones.

This study uses a qualitative approach and is based on thematic analysis, discourse pragmatics (Beciu, 2011), and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Van Leeuwen, 2007). This mixed approach can contribute both to the identification of the discussion topics introduced by influencers and to the reveal of the most used discursive strategies to construct arguments and justify positions. First, using thematic analysis, the study will identify the main topics associated by influencers with ‘good parenting’. Second, using speech act theory, the analysis identifies specific discursive strategies used by Romanian parenting influencers on Facebook to promote parenting workshops, seminars, or books. Third, using Van Leeuwen’s (2007) critical discourse analysis framework, the study analyzes the discursive strategies through which parenting influencers (de)legitimize different parenting approaches. Lastly, the study discusses the discursive identities created for the influencers and the parents they address to shape power relations. This is done by using Beciu’s framework (2011, p. 47). This is an exploratory study meant to provide a way of analyzing influencer discourse and to identify emergent discursive strategies that are characteristic of the type of discourse employed by Romanian parenting influencers on social media.

The research corpus comprises 100 messages posted on public Facebook pages by Romanian parenting influencers between December 2022, and March 2023. According to a study by Starcom Romania in 2022, Facebook and WhatsApp are the most used social media platforms in Romania. Therefore, promotional content posted on Facebook has the potential to reach many social media users, including parents. This research works with a randomized, convenience sample, that was selected to provide relevant data on the addressed topic, having in mind that it will be qualitatively analyzed by the researcher, without the help of automated text analysis software. To study the frequency of certain words used by Romanian parenting influencers the Browselink.com tool was used. An equal number of messages were selected from each influencer’s professional Facebook page with the intention to provide a general view of the most addressed topics by the parenting influencers (see Table 1). To provide focus, this study analyzes discourses that address parenting subjects aimed at parents of toddlers, preschoolers, and school-aged children.

Table 1. The corpus of the study

<i>Influencer</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Posts</i>
Anca Zlavog	858	25
Raluca Stefan	2,5 K	25
Oana Moraru	100K	25
Urania Cremene	816k	25

For this analysis, only promotional and educational content was selected, as it is the main type of content that can provide relevant data to answer the research questions. Posts regarding other subjects than parenting education or books (as in the case of Oana Moraru, who also shares personal or professional content that is nonrelated to parenting,) were discarded. In terms of format, the present study focuses on written text, representing the caption of a Face-

book post, and does not include infographics, images, and video content. Given the discourse-focused approach of this study, text format content was considered denser in discursive strategies that can help reach the objectives of this study. Video or image format content would ask for a multimodal and semiotic approach, which is not the focus of this paper. The influencers were selected based on their popularity and follower base so that they represent two of the categories identified by Gottbrecht (2016) and referred to by Balaban and Mustatea (2019, p. 34) as: 'peer-to-peer level or micro-level influencers (500-10,000 followers)' and 'macro influencers (up to 1 million followers)'. Content selection was meant to reproduce day-to-day interaction with these influencers by the usual Facebook user, even if they accessed the promoted parenting programs or are just following the influencers' pages to benefit from the free parenting advice provided.

Anca Zlavog is a micro-influencer and parenting coach accredited by the Jai Institute for Parenting, which teaches parenting strategies based on "non-violent communication, emotional intelligence and the neuroplasticity work of Bruce Lipton" (jaiinstituteforparenting.com/about, n.d.). Raluca Stefan is a micro-influencer and parenting counselor certified by *Aware Parenting* and Aletha Solter, a disciple of Jean Piaget. She is also the first Peaceful Parenting Instructor in Romania, accredited by the Peaceful Parent Institute, in New Zealand (povestedemamica.com/despre-mine, n.d.). Oana Moraru is a macro-influencer and an educational consultant with extensive experience in education. She is also the founder of the Helikon Private School, and the platform *Vocea Parintilor* (*The Voice of the Parents*). Although her main experience is in education, she has become well-known for addressing the impact of different parenting approaches on children's school performance. Urania Cremene is one of the most well-known parenting influencers in Romania. She is a master trainer, coach, and facilitator, and the founder of the program *All About Parenting*. Her parenting views are inspired by the self-determination theory formulated by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan.

Data presentation and discussion. A parent-child-centered universe

The results¹ of this study show that parental determinism and risk consciousness strongly influence parenting discourses promoted by Romanian parenting experts (see examples 1 – 4). Such trends are in line with the most cited studies in the field (i.e., Furedi, 2002; Faircloth, 2014; Lee, 2014). The social media influencers that were the subject of the analysis directly or indirectly state the influence that parenting approaches can have on the well-being of children and their future adult behavior. The emotional literacy of parents, their ability to firmly and respectfully set limits, their involvement in the educational process of their children, or their focus on connection, and relationship can have important outcomes in the way the child finds their place in the world.

Example 1: *These behavioral patterns are not reasons for guilt or self-blame. We are all in a scheme. The only important thing to know is that children are never responsible for initiating these relational mechanics. It is always the adult. And the child's behavior is the result of the dynamics in which they were put early, from birth, without having the right to conscious choice.* (Oana Moraru, November 25, 2002)

Example 2: *To have resilience you must be inspired by the mindset of someone who moves forward despite hardships. (...) Motivation does not come from the need to be better, stronger, or better performing. (...) Children's role models are, in the beginning, their parents and*

educators. They must emanate energy, direction, and the will to do things, to follow a plan, a program, or a target. (Oana Moraru, February 15, 2023)

Example 3: *And all of this gathers like a big lump that rolls over criticism, insults, or injustices that the child carries with him throughout their life, and that turns them into a “defective” adult. The adult becomes rigid and unable to give love. He becomes the adult who in adolescence broke his relationship with the authoritarian and perfectionist parent – a break that left a void that could never be filled.* (Urania Cremene, March 13, 2023)

Example 4: *But this is about us and how sure we are that we are doing the right thing for our children. About how strongly we believe that until they grow up and master their emotions and bodies, we are their source of self-control. So, if you want to find out what techniques you can apply, starting tomorrow, so that you can set healthy limits that protect your child from addictions and toxic relationships, come to the webinar (...).* (Urania Cremene, March 11, 2023)

In this context, expert-based advice should be sought to best understand and manage the parent-child relationship. What is discursively portrayed as ‘conscious parenting’ can also be seen as a form of *anxiety-driven parenting*, where parents’ fears about their impact on their children’s lives are capitalized on to promote workshops, coaching programs, or books. The nature of risk is diffuse and can materialize in several hard-to-quantify ways: broken self-esteem, lack of discipline and intrinsic motivation, an estranged relationship with the parent, predisposition to addiction, loss of authenticity, or low academic performance. Thus, a normative, *recipe-based parenting* approach emerges, meant to prevent any of this from happening. The unwritten assumption is that all parents following this advice can achieve positive outcomes, regardless of their circumstances, and of the temperament, personality, and affinities of the child. Moreover, the cultivation of the relationship between parents and children becomes central, with a particular focus on the mother-child relationship (example 5).

Example 5: *Because if the mother is well, the children are also well. If the mother is well, the whole family is well.* (Urania Cremene, March 9, 2023)

This echoes the results of Sunderland’s (2006) study on parenting magazine articles which, despite using the term ‘parent’ to address both mothers and fathers, are mostly directed toward mothers. In the analyzed corpus, even if most of the time parenting influencers use the term ‘parents’, and refer to the fathers as well, the main target audience is represented by mothers, whose role in establishing the balance of the family is discursively inflated. The parent-child-centered universe is narrowed down to a mother-centered one (*A mother is like the flame of the night, everything swarms around her.*, Urania Cremene, March 8, 2023). These results will be detailed in the following sections, thus answering the three research questions.

The meaning of being a ‘good parent’. The emergence of the ‘conscious parent’

After conducting a thematic analysis, the most addressed topics by the Romanian parenting influencers were identified. The resulting categories are emergent from the direct interaction with the analyzed corpus. The focus was not on the frequency of the discussed topics, but rather on isolating a list of discussed topics in the time frame of this study. These topics were then separated into three categories, as synthesized in Table 2 below: the definition of

good parenting, the role of the expert in achieving good parenting skills, and the envisioned outcomes for the child. Good parenting is constructed as part of a dichotomy between newer and desirable parenting actions, expert-validated and supported by science, and past intuitive approaches. This perspective justifies the existence of parenting experts, who have the insights needed to properly understand the true nature of their children's interior world. The classical distinction between 'us *versus* them' is redefined as 'now *versus* then'. In this light, in today's world parents, who are the product of old parenting practices and techniques, need guidance to change old-school practices, to best respond to the needs of their children.

Table 2. Main topics addressed in parenting influencers' online discourse

<i>Good parenting</i>	<i>The role of the expert</i>	<i>Outcome for the child</i>
- Practicing gentle parenting - Setting limits - Respectfully managing difficult child behavior - Cultivating the parent-child relationship - Protecting and encouraging the authenticity of the child - Understanding the true meaning of child behavior - Practicing empathy and leading by example - Achieving inner balance and (self)compassion - Focus on attachment and connection - Understanding the inner world of the child and accepting all emotions - Understanding the importance of play and taking part in it - Developing an emotional vocabulary and knowing how to express needs - Guiding children through strong emotions and providing an example of balance and self-control - Becoming aware of the harmful educational beliefs of the past and no longer perpetuating them - Accepting imperfect behavior and recognizing faults - Able to change the past and redefine parenting	- Offers support for parent self-regulation - Validates the hardships of parenthood - Legitimizes old parenting views and shares new ones, that reflect the real needs of children - Offers recipes for achieving child's cooperation - Offers tips on managing emotions in children, normalizes negative emotions - Dismantles misconceptions regarding child behavior - Offers personal example as a reference for managing a difficult situation - Spots dissonance between the wishes of the parents and their actions - Offers a way of providing discipline without punishment or rewards - Provides simple recipes for connection - Offers ways of healing trauma and alleviating difficult emotions in the child - Stresses the importance of external help - Offers tips on how to engage in play - Provides guidance for parents on how to stimulate child curiosity and motivation to study - Offers strategies to cultivate a love for reading - Understands the needs of different typologies of children - Guides the parent in choosing the right kindergarten or school - Promotes conscious parenting	- Better adolescents who can make good decisions - Strengthened relationship with the parent - Discovering the authentic self - Responsible, disciplined, empathic, and cooperative children - Better able to recognize and avoid deviant behavior - Developed self-control - Cultivating positive relationships - Able to find a job that brings joy

While not always explicitly formulated, parenting influencers operate on a premise that parents today are harmed by old parenting techniques and need to make a conscious effort in identifying and correcting them to have a strong connection with themselves and their children. In this process, they need an 'empathic witness' (Zlavog, January 26, 2023) in the person of the parenting coach or educator, who can give them the right guidance to overcome the shortcomings of the past (see example 6). The parental deterministic view makes it necessary for parents to be parented as well.

Example 6: *Why is it sometimes so hard for us, as adults, to play? (...) There can be many answers: It matters how much the adults who took care of us in childhood played with us; the beliefs we have about play are also important, and here I am not referring to what we believe rationally, but to the deep thoughts that have settled in our past; (...) playing requires presence, and because of some traumatic events, we can be disconnected from ourselves and others. The good part? All of the above is reversible through the presence of an empathic witness and coaching.* (Anca Zlavog, January 26, 2023)

Such parenting discourses create a normative approach to parenting which makes it mandatory for aspiring ‘good parents’ to embark on internal work and examination, to repair their hurts and not pass them to the newer generations. Considering that discourse is meant to promote social action, such directives encourage parents to spend increased time with their children, and manifest endless patience, which can sometimes lead to parental burnout. Parenting becomes not only a process meant to help children grow into functional and well-adjusted adults but also an all-consuming process of self-actualization for the adult parent.

As for the envisioned impact of good parenting on children (see Table 2 above), influencers parenting discourses enact an *aspirational dimension*, by promising the achievement of positive outcomes for children. In doing so they respond to the main fears parents might have regarding their short and long-term interactions with their children: inability to achieve cooperation, an estranged parent-child relationship, a lack of autonomy and resilience in children, an inability of the future adolescents to bypass deviant behavior, the cultivation of malfunctioning relationships, inability to succeed in the job market, etc.

Such ideas also reflect parents’ aspirations towards their own lives, such as the need for meaningful relationships, or a satisfying job. Good parenting is not only driven by *anxiety* but also by *ambition*. Through their discourses, influencers revive an older parenting theme: the self-realization of parents through their children. However, they give this old theme a new twist: the self-actualization of parents via achievement of higher parenting skills and epiphanies (*‘If you also want to experience how transformation vs. information feels like, schedule a free discovery session to learn more’*, Anca Zlavog, November 7, 2022). Good parenting is not only about achieving skills, it is also a transformative process. While this transformative process is discursively described by influencers as a desirable and fulfilling state, it is also criticized by authors such as Furedi (2002), who associates it with the ‘emptying out of adult identity’ (p. 120).

(De)legitimization strategies of parenting practices.

A discourse of moral evaluation

In the process of defining what good parenting is today, influencers use several discursive (de)legitimization strategies, which were analyzed in this study with the help of discourse pragmatics and CDA. In this regard, the attention of the researcher was directed towards the speech acts used by the influencers to describe ‘good parenting’, towards formulating hypotheses concerning the discourse effects such speech acts might have, and towards the specific discursive strategies used to legitimize their advice and parenting education programs or books.

A commonly used message structure to promote parenting seminars, workshops, or books, when looking at the entire corpus, is interpellation/value judgment followed by injunction.

Influencers start either with a set of questions addressed to parents or with reproduction, or evaluation of wide-known parenting phrases or situations.

Example 7: *Did you know that we are responsible for meeting our own needs, not others?* (Anca Zlavog, January 19, 2023)

Example 8: *Would you like to know why your child is whiny even if you try to fulfill all his wishes? Would you like to know why your child can't let go of certain toys and what "safety toys" mean? Would you like to know why your child speaks to you in a commanding or "disrespectful" tone?* (Raluca Stefan, March 13, 2023)

Example 9: *A child who is criticized in a severe tone... A child who always feels the pressure of harsh words when nothing pleases his perfectionist mother... A kid who hunches his shoulders in resignation after being scolded by his father just because he tore his new soccer equipment... cannot choose to leave. At least not at 5 or 9 years old.* (Urania Cremene, March 13, 2023).

Such discursive strategies are meant to invest the influencers with a position of power in relation to their followers. By formulating an interpellation (examples 7 and 8), they implicitly state their knowledge on a topic, and directly address those in search of an answer to certain parenting dilemmas. Finally, through value judgment (example 9), the influencer invests themselves with the authority and legitimacy to evaluate situations and to formulate conclusions. Following the classic structure of promotional content, most messages end with an injunction aimed to stimulate followers to join a workshop, seminar, or coaching program, or to purchase a book that provides answers to the previously identified problems.

These discursive effects are strengthened by other speech acts meant to enhance the authority position of the parenting experts. One of the most widely used ways of conveying parenting advice is through confessions (example 10). This creates the impression of authenticity in communication, as the expert downplays their status and invites parents to witness their own parenting performance. Confessions provide evidence of the efficacy of the parenting advice offered by the expert.

Example 10: *Last week, after coming home from school, my little girl started talking to me in a commanding tone, "Bring me, make me...etc". I think you recognize it, right? My first thought might have been, "How dare she talk to me like that?" or "This is disrespectful!". It is even more difficult for us not to be flooded with such thoughts if when we were little no one would have ever allowed us to talk like this. It may seem disrespectful from the outside. Inside, however, things are totally different. When you yell, do you feel powerful? Most likely not. When we feel the need to speak up, we feel frustrated and powerless. Our children feel the same. My little girl had come home from school emotionally charged and the only way she knew how to let me know that she wasn't feeling well inside was by adopting an authoritarian tone of voice. Even though she seemed powerful using that tone, inside she felt totally powerless. So, to help her, I decided to reconnect with an attachment game that's also a wonderful power-reversal game (you also found it in my Christmas Advent calendar), "Your Majesty." In this game, I pretend to be the servant in the castle, and she is the queen. And I come so humbly to her saying, "Yes, majesty, tell me, how can I help you? Would you like your water, would you like me to help you change clothes?" Then, if you're feeling playful, you can add some fun by saying, "Do you need me to poke your nose too? Maybe the ears?" They will hardly resist not laughing. That's how it happened in our case. As soon as I initiated the game, her face started to light up. The frown bright-*

ened and you could see how the whole body dissolved the tension with the help of laughter. It didn't last more than 5 minutes, and it was just what she needed to dispel the feelings she came loaded with, reconnect with me, and return to a balanced state. Then she quietly found something to play with, without any trace of a commanding tone. (Raluca Stefan, February 15, 2023)

In the example above, confession creates the framework for introducing the influencer's evaluations of default parenting reactions (associated with old-fashioned parenting) and an opportunity for reframing the meaning of challenging child behavior. They redefine the situation using interpellation ('When you yell, do you feel powerful?') followed by assertion ('Most likely not'). By doing so they discursively legitimize their parenting approach mimicking objectivity, even if the argument was built on a probability and not a fact. Confession also creates the basis for the normalization of parenting hardships, and humanizes the experts, by making them more relatable. However, it also strengthens their status by legitimizing their advice, because they have the knowledge to guide parental reactions to widespread challenging child behavior. And they have already succeeded in applying these new parenting techniques. They legitimize their expert position by invoking knowledge the parents do not have. Thus, the discursive act of confession in parenting discourse becomes a form of strategic and promotional sharenting.

Other speech acts meant to enact the knowledgeable position of experts are obligation (example 11), value judgment (example 12), assertion (example 13), or suggestion (example 14).

Example 11: Mobilization for work, the reflex to honor your work, to put your energy in one direction – these are values that must be activated daily, with determination, with a plan, without accepting refusal'. (Oana Moraru, November 22, 2022)

Example 12: Many times, as parents, we suffer from a double standard – at the level of values, we want to raise independent children, able to choose for themselves, to set healthy limits in relationships, to be creative, brave, entrepreneurial, innovative, but also to listen, don't disturb others, do what we tell them, don't insist when we ask for something, accept our reasons without asking us 100 questions. (Anca Zlavog, January 30, 2023)

Example 13: The parent-child relationship is not about who is wrong or right. It's about how we help children become the best version of themselves. How do we teach them what's good for them and what's not, so they know how to make the healthiest choices when we're not around? (Urania Cremene, March 18, 2023)

Example 14: Let them decide what to put in their package, from 2-3 healthy options, choose what they want to wear, and where they want to brush their teeth (my little girl this morning preferred to brush on teeth in the living room and the rest of the toilet in the morning, in the bathroom), what music they want to listen to in the car if applicable and anything else possible. Try to differentiate between basic needs and values, because we often forget that needs are more important and that our values are not the same as children's. (Raluca Stefan, February 6, 2023)

In terms of legitimation strategies, parenting influencers tend to promote a discourse of moral evaluation – (de)legitimation by reference to discourses of value (Van Leeuwen, 2007). As such, parenting is discursively constructed as a *value-driven process* as well, meant to guide both parents and children toward the achievement of higher standards. This is supported by the dichotomy between old *versus* new parenting approaches, instinctive *versus* conscious reactions, right *versus* wrong interpretations of child behavior, and the identification

of parental cognitive dissonances (as can be seen in example 12). Another strategy of legitimation is by direct experience – the influencers have both professional and personal experience to guide the parents in the right direction, to accomplish their aspirational parenting objectives. Confession and personal example play an important role by providing proof of the validity of their ways. References to scientific studies, parenting authors, and theories are meant to legitimize parenting advice and services or products promoted by parenting influencers through the argument of authority.

Identities and power relations in online parenting discourses. A tale of mentors and mentees

The results of the present study resonate with other research on the professionalization of parenting. Following in the footsteps of Chernova and Shpakovskaya (2016), this study reveals a type of professionalization of parenting based on expert knowledge. Assuming that parents are subjected to social pressure to act in ways that do not represent the best interest of their children, or do not strengthen the child-parent relationship (example 15), the role of the experts is paramount in guiding parents toward aligning with their desired parenting values. Experts have both the objectivity and the knowledge for this.

Example 15: Many parents wonder how they can change their children's unpleasant behavior without resorting to punishment or rewards. Also, influenced by a strong imprint from a society that tells us that this is the only way our children can be educated, it is even more difficult to see things differently. (Raluca Stefan, January 27, 2023)

To legitimate their position, experts use a specialized language, where day-to-day child behavior is rewritten: when children ask for help to complete tasks they can easily do by themselves, this is an *invitation to connection*; challenging child behavior such as being disrespectful, hitting or biting, acting up is the result of a *build-up of painful feelings / painful emotional baggage*. Children's capacity to easily accept limits is defined as a *state of emotional balance*, while the refusal of limits and tantrums are representative of a *state of emotional imbalance*. Not following the child's lead is redefined as *holding the limit*, and showing patience with the child is manifesting *empathy*. The use of reverse psychology techniques to achieve the cooperation of the child is called *the attachment game*.

Other frequently used words by parenting influencers are trauma, brain development, prefrontal cortex, emotional intelligence, secure attachment, behavior, non-directive play, self-regulation, self-control, awareness, motivation, emotion, gentleness, cooperation, cognitive function, academic performance, or temperament. This shows the colonization of the parenting discourse with terms from psychology, psychotherapy, education/pedagogy, or neurobiology. As explained by Cottam and Espie (2014) such an approach creates the premises for expert knowledge to trump parental competence and instinct. To understand the true meaning of their children's behavior and needs, parents need parenting experts.

Comparing the results of the present study with the one conducted by Cottam and Espie (2014) on parental training programs, the discourse of Romanian parenting influencers shows similarities with discourses of victimhood, scientism discourses, and collaboration discourses. Parents are victims of old parenting techniques and of culturally infused social pressure, who need the help and guidance of experts to navigate cognitive dissonances which prevent

them from doing the right thing for their children. The right approach is however different from instinctive or automatic responses and implies the need for mindful solutions.

However, the victimhood discourse observed in this study is different from the one identified by Cottam and Espie, as it does not imply the passivity of the parents or children. The frequent references to today's world parents' quest to find different approaches than those of their own parents, implies agency and a recognition of their desire to change. Parenting advice is a mere response to an emerging need coming from parental aspirations as well. In the same manner, children are victims only if parents do not consciously re-examine their reactions and behavior. However, they are not passive receivers of care, but constantly send cues regarding their true needs, becoming guides of their parents in their parenting journey (*I'll tell you the sequel another time and what Bob taught me about anger because I owe it to him to get out of this anger-related numbness*. Anca Zlavog, November 11, 2023). Parenting experts are the binder that can mediate in the relationship between parents and their children; they explain the hidden messages in children's challenging behavior. In the presence of the expert, the child gains a voice and agency. When no attention is given to expert care, and parents follow a traditional approach of parenting, focused solely on instinct, the child loses his/her agency and becomes a victim of the parent and of transgenerational trauma.

In this context, the parenting expert is not a savior, but rather a mentor, or guide of the parent, and an 'empathic witness', providing support, compassion, and simple parenting recipes, that were previously tried and validated through direct experience. The parenting expert is most frequently a parent who has 'learned their lessons the hard way', who has completed the same transformative journey aspiring good parents need to embark on and can offer a shortcut and insights (example 16) on how anyone with the right attitude can achieve the same level of enlightenment. The authority of the expert comes from their certification and direct experience, and from the use of a specialized language. This language is different from the scientism discourse identified by Cottam and Espie (2014), as it is not always based on science, but is a juxtaposition of scientific evidence, specialized terms, anecdotal evidence, and pure speculation.

Example 16: For two hours, I will talk to you about how you can divide your time, so that you also help the little one with homework or worksheets, and take care of the house, but don't neglect yourself either; you receive 5 techniques that will help you speak your child's language and explain when you can play with him and when you need time for yourself; why behind a balanced parent, who does not reach exhaustion, there is a well-established program and a rigorous organization of the day; how to involve both the child and the other family members in household tasks, in order to save your energy for the things that matter (Urania Cremene, March 8, 2023)

Finally, the use of the inclusive 'we' in most parenting messages can indicate a discursive construction of collaboration between experts and parents (example 17). Such a collaboration is desirable and necessary to ensure the best outcomes for the parent-child relationship. This is also a strategy of legitimation by identifying with parents. In other words, parenting experts are parents as well, and have the symbolic right to offer parenting advice as opposed to individuals who do not have children. However, the role of the expert is consolidated by repositioning strategies like in example 18:

Example 17: I wholeheartedly believe that we still need a witness to guide us when it comes to working with ourselves, and reading books or deciding not to repeat certain patterns can help, but they are not enough. (Anca Zlavog, November 25, 2022)

Example 18: *Hidden in subtle or obvious forms, severity often expresses our fear, as parents, of losing control over the child's life. The fear that we might make a mistake in his education, risking that he will not end up well in life, is often paralyzing to our souls. So... we resort to very strict rules, stinging words, or oppressive silences. (...) It's just that the child's soul is crying, even if you can't see it from the outside. And there will come a day when they will start counting the days until they will live home. And when they leave, it may be hard for you to realize that they won't look back, consult you in any decision or ask for your help when they need it. (...) As parents, we certainly do not want this, because we love our children beyond measure. And from the moment you get to wonder what you can do to fix your mistakes, you can start by showing them the unconditional love you have for them. Continue to face the pain of the past so you can heal the wounds of the present. And above all, allow yourself to forgive yourself and start a new chapter in your life, namely the one dedicated to conscious and empathetic parenting. And no, it won't be easy, but I'm with you to guide you on this journey, where you can realize what severity means and how much harm it can do to a child's soul.* (Urania Cremene, March 12, 2023)

A practice widely used by influencers, and illustrated in example 18, is the oscillation between 'we' and 'you'. The inclusive pronoun is used to validate the most common fears of parents, or to construct a consensus regarding all parents' wishes for their children. By identifying themselves with parents, the influencer becomes more relatable and humane, and restates their knowledge and ability to assess reality. However, the switch to the impersonal tone and to the use of 'you' suggests a distancing of the expert from old parenting practices and provides an opportunity for a discursive repositioning and a reconfiguration of parenting expectations today. This marks a differentiation in status between experts, who have achieved a higher level of knowledge and consciousness, and parents, who need to follow their advice and go through a laborious self-reflection process to become *conscious and empathetic*. Parenting becomes a *journey* and the relationship between expert and parent becomes similar to that of a mentor with their mentee. Conscious parenting becomes the only valid choice but the motivating factor behind choosing it is still the fear of losing control over the child's life or the fear of hurting their personality, or authenticity.

Discussion and conclusions. Professionalization or intensive parenting?

This paper aimed to investigate how Romanian parenting influencers construct 'good parenting' practices on their public Facebook pages; the (de)legitimization strategies used by such influencers to promote their products or services; and the shaping of power relations between experts and parents, based on their assigned discursive identities. To answer the first research question, the results of the study showed a discursive construction of good parenting starting from a dichotomy between old and new parenting practices. The latter is grounded on a parental determinist view, on risk consciousness, and on intensive parenting. 'Good parenting' becomes the expression of higher parental values such as the cultivation of a secure relationship between the parent and the child, echoing popular psychological views launched in the 1960's by authors such as Bowlby and Winnicott and confirmed by later studies. It also reflects on Romanian parents' aspirations for a brighter future for their children, by (largely) importing Western middle class parenting values, which are deemed superior to the collectivist and authoritarian values of old Romanian parenting approaches.

This is also reflected in a recent study conducted by Save the Children Romania (2023), which indicates that more than half of the Romanian children would like to leave the country to work and study. The lack of trust in the Romanian education system and lack of trust in work-force integration provide explanations for the desire of educated Romanian parents to practice intense parenting to ensure the future academic and professional success of their children.

Parenting is also an *anxiety-driven* process, where parents, fearing several abstract or direct risks, are encouraged to carefully examine themselves, their motivations, and behaviors, as to not pass on transgenerational trauma. Such risks can be future addictions or deviant behavior, the estrangement of the parent-child relationship, or suppressing the child's authentic self.

As a result, 'good parenting', as constructed discursively, becomes a 'professionalized' field, as one needs to read books or participate in seminars and workshops that convey expert-formulated and research-based advice on ensuring personal growth for both the parent and the child. Parenting is not something that can be carried out naturally, but it becomes a learned 'skill set.' In this process, "people other than parents have special insights that can and should be brought to bear" (Lee, 2014, p. 8). These results support Ramaekers and Suissa's (2011) observation that parenting has become an 'educationally goal-oriented practice,' where parents are expected to act as educators of their children and to stay up to date with the newest ideas and scientific research regarding 'good parenting.' One cannot solely tap into personal life experience to best guide their children but needs to permanently educate themselves (with the help of books and seminars) to parent successfully.

This also reflects on neoliberal values. In a neoliberal society, individuals have an entrepreneurial view of the self. They are competitors that pursue their self-interest, and their well-being is self-determined (Adams et al., 2019). They are seen as 'ongoing development projects' and should aim for 'personal growth and fulfillment, which emphasizes the importance of 'affect management for self-regulation' (Adams et al., 2019). As Wall (2004) points out, this worldview emphasizes "the ability of individuals to adapt to change, to engage in self-enhancing behavior, and to manage the risk they pose to themselves and thus reduce their potential burden on society" (p. 46). Consequently, individuals need guidance in what concerns their life project, and this makes room for new specialists that help them apply the best strategies to achieve their personal goals.

This guidance is firstly provided by social media parenting experts, who train parents into what it means to parent successfully and 'consciously'. Secondly, parents themselves become guides or coaches for their children, in order to help them fulfill their entrepreneurial self. In this logic, the parenting experts on social media discursively pose into the owners of the right knowledge. In comparison with old parenting experts, they use a powerful media-tizing tool to give more visibility to the ideas they promote, and a different language, less formal, more personal, to better connect to their audiences. They are also the promoters of platform emergent discursive strategies – such as confessions. While not new in the realm of discourse production and analysis, confession is widely adopted in social media discourse as a way of building the authenticity necessary to generate impact.

The free parenting advice available on the social media pages of such experts is presented as just the preamble to a more complex discussion, which is to be discovered by those willing to invest more resources into discovering them. This is where the value of the online parenting discourses stands – in making complex notions and values relatable, easily digestible, and readily available to larger audiences. This is also its limitation – as in doing so, it marches on ideologically and promotionally infused discourses to ensure platform performance.

In terms of discursive strategies used, the results of the study show a strong promotional side of the expert parenting discourse on Facebook, directly influenced by the mediatization logic and marketing techniques. Influencers use specific occasions such as the 8th of March, which in Romania is also considered Mother's Day, to intensify communication and direct their messages at mothers, even if they usually address their messages to parents in general. This gives parenting expert discourse on Facebook a strategic dimension.

The frequent use of confessions also reflects on this aspect as well, as to further ensure the credibility of the expert, personal struggles and victories are shared as proof that the shared advice is working. There are several communicational logics that converge, leading to an emergent form of parenting discourse, which is reflective of the neo-feminist and neoliberal logic identified by Jorge and collaborators (2022). There is the logic of the promotional and marketing view of the communicational project belonging to the expert, the logic of the platform used and its communicational specificities (Facebook), and the actual expert advice invoked by parenting experts to legitimate their position. We witness a marketing infused parenting speech, which is disguised in parenting advice.

Consequently, answering the second research question, a moral evaluation discourse emerges, meant to delegitimize old parenting approaches (mostly intuitive, automatic, or authoritarian) and to legitimize *conscious parenting* which is to be practiced with expert guidance and support. Embarking on this journey becomes the necessary decision to protect children from as many risks they might be exposed to as possible, and to coach them into becoming functional, performant, resilient, and self-reliant adults. Also, by using social media as a communication platform, these influencers, despite positioning themselves as experts, can also benefit from the outcomes of parasocial interactions (Taher et al., 2022). This has the potential to help their message gain legitimacy, by making them more relatable, as besides their knowledge, they express their concerns and struggles while parenting, but also provide solutions. Therefore, legitimization comes from direct experience and invoking research proven approaches as well. 'Good parenting' acquires a normative character and becomes a standard against which all parenting actions are measured.

In answer to the third research question, the normative approach of parenting is played down by the discursive construction of parenting as a collaborative journey of a mentor (the parenting expert) and their mentee (the parent), in which hardship is recognized, validated, and overcome with empathetic support and practical advice from the expert. While such an approach has its merits, it can also disempower, confuse, or frustrate parents, as parenting by recipe might not always lead to the desired outcomes. Additionally, it can create a sense of dependence between mentees and their mentors. This requires an investment of time, energy, and financial resources, which is not easy for all parents to replicate.

Consequently, 'good parenting', as described by parenting influencers, might be the attribute of educated and financially strong parents, while for those lacking in resources, it might remain only an aspiration and a source of frustration. Given the limited extent of this study, such observations remain to be further investigated. The small dimension of the corpus constitutes a limit of this study, this being the reason behind its exploratory nature, which is meant to provide a methodological starting point for the study of parenting influencers' online discourse.

Overall, as the results show, 'good parenting' calls for a type of intensive parenting that can become overwhelming at a time when parents have several responsibilities to balance at once. The multifaceted adult identity might as well become overshadowed by its parental

side, especially in the case of mothers. Whether this is the expression of an emptying of adult identity as Furedi (2002) suggests, or a natural consequence of the shift in parenting values and expectations remains to be further investigated.

However, it is realistic to expect that such a profound turn in a person's life, which involves a high level of responsibility for the life of another person and a loss of control over one's schedule and freedom, can bring a seismic reorganization of one's identity. The adjustment process to the new life can be different from person to person, and in the process, all kinds of support are useful to make the transition more manageable. As such, expert advice cannot be easily discarded. However, it is important to see its ideological and promotional side, in order not to be entrapped by it. Realistic expectations and a critical approach to parenting advice (Connell-Carrick, 2006) are good solutions until a shift in the understanding of childhood (Hays, 1996) might happen once again.

This approach is important as one should also keep in mind the hidden price of intense parenting, or its more gender-specific form, 'intensive mothering', a practice that goes beyond time and money investments, becoming "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays, 1996, p. 8). The import of parental values from Western societies, the old *versus* new (and desirable) parenting practices, the subtraction of the parents from their cultural space, and disregarding their economic and educational background can lead to a lot of conflict and disorientation. As Hays (1996) and Ennis (2014) underline, we are facing a cultural contradiction, where new families, and especially women, despite their involvement in the workforce, are expected to perform both as productive employees and as perfect parents/mothers, at the expense of their other social connections and their well-being. It is in this context that 'parental burnout' (Mikolajczak, Gross, & Roskam, 2021) arises as natural. This also explains the emergence of social media support groups and the practice of sharenting, as these offer a platform for not-so-perfect parents/mothers to express genuine emotion and find support.

It also sets the stage for 'mommy wars' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) or the 'tribalization of parents' (Faircloth, 2014). Even if intensive parenting is practiced differently by each parent/mother (depending on race, gender, class, or culture), it has become a 'normative standard' (Arendell, 2000 *in* Faircloth, 2014) or an ideal by which parenting practice is evaluated. As Faircloth (2014, pp. 28-29) notices, "what parents feed their children, how they discipline them, where they put them to bed, how they play with them: all of these have become politically, and morally, charged questions". Consequently, parents and more specifically mothers are in a 'double bind' where their divergent parenting choices are both a basis for risk reduction discourses but also for criticism regarding the precariousness of their choices (Faircloth, 2014). To adapt and save face, they are forced to produce ideological discourses meant to justify the benefits of one parenting choice or another (Hays, 1996), which in turn further polarizes them.

Thus, intense parenting becomes not only a way of protecting children against the many threats and risks that living in uncertain times might bring but also a way of 'making it better' for insecure parents (Villalobos, 2014). The emergence of parenting experts becomes a mere response to the need of parents to be parented, as well. However, the price to pay is even more anxiety and insecurity, as one needs to navigate between a wide range of parenting approaches, which are sometimes contradictory, or hard to attain. Parents' well-being is negatively affected by intensive parenting, according to recent studies (Novoa, et al., 2022). Stressed and over-involved parenting can lead to greater pressure on children, as well, since they need

to work to meet their parents' projections and can sometimes be disempowered by high parental involvement.

Overall, parenting by recipe can lead to increased isolation of new parents, as imported expert parenting advice can lead to a recalibration of family, work, or interpersonal relations. Conflicting advice coming from folk wisdom and experts is the reason for conflict between generations. This only adds to the pressure parents need to face, as they are entrusted with both successfully raising and educating their children, but also redeeming their own parents' mistakes and adapting new parenting practices to the requirements of evolving contemporary societies. Consequently, "the presumption of generational responsibility that has historically underpinned childrearing becomes disorganized, with adults positioned as both the omnipotent protectors of children and the ultimate cause of all their problems" (Lee, 2014, p. 20). An illustrative example is the 2020 Romanian translation of Janet G. Woitiz's book, *Healthy Parenting: How Your Upbringing Influences the Way You Raise Your Children, and What You Can Do to Make It Better for Them* (1992), with the title *Mai bun decât părinții tăi* (literal translation: *Better than your parents*).

Note

¹ The examples provided in this study to support claims have been translated verbatim from Romanian to English by the author.

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