



Memeability and sharenting: The affective economy of children on social media

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Abstract

This article considers how children's memeability is entangled with commercial sharenting narratives through two case studies of (mothers) influencers and their daughters in Brazil and Portugal. The Brazilian mother privileges cute aesthetics by enchantment in an inspirational sharenting and does not promote the child's memeability. In contrast, the Portuguese influencer privileges cringe aesthetics, encouraging her daughter's memeability by exploring the ambivalence of parenting with humor in a transgressive sharenting. The findings point to the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the memetic culture. In Brazil, the child's image was appropriated for playful and parodic engagement, neglecting her privacy, reputation, and well-being despite her mother's public complaint. This unauthorized memeability results from the girl's celebrification after her display in viral content and advertising campaigns. In contrast, the encouraged

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memeability of the Portuguese influencer does not exceed her community of followers since her daughter's recognition seems limited to an extension of the mother's self.

Keywords

Affective publics, cringe, cuteness, Instagram, memes

Introduction

In a media culture where almost every public event generates a stream of memes (Shifman, 2014), children's images frequently gain widespread visibility among memes of significant cultural and political moments. As a primordial target of feelings and emotions in our societies (Dale et al., 2017), images of children inspire affective intensities in popular memes, including funny and messy moments or awkward expressions.

Some of the most popular memes feature children, such as side-eyeing Chloe or the Success Kid Sam Griner (Gallagher, 2022), and many of them become Internet memes due to their parents' sharenting (Burke, 2022). This article looks at two case studies of famous (mothers) influencers and their children in Brazil and Portugal and how memeability is entangled with commercial sharenting in different ways. The goal is to understand children's celebrity-making process in the context of different sharenting narratives and their identities (re)appropriation in memes by unpredictable and uncontrollable affective publics.

Sharenting by ordinary parents could unexpectedly originate memes using their children's image, sometimes enabling the commodification of this digital format. In turn, for celebrities or influencers, the trending activity of repeatedly sharing images and detailed information about one's child on social media (Cataldo et al., 2022) could be seen as an intentional form of capitalizing intimacy (Raun, 2018), as children contribute to promote relatability and to increase the perceived authenticity of their parents (Jorge et al., 2022b). Thus, children engage audiences, and their memeability can be a mechanism for producing stardom; audiences enable virality and memes as part of the celebrity-making process, which, in turn, is essential to commodifying digital presence (Mercer and Sarson, 2020).

On the one hand, while scholarship on sharenting has been flourishing, more is to be known about the affective mechanisms at play, particularly in how the engagement of audiences is produced and capitalized by creators; on the other hand, scholarship on memes calls for a reconciliation between attention to formal aspects and participation in processes of commodification. This article combines debates on influencer sharenting and memes to better understand the affective economy underneath the hypermemetic logic of digital platforms and popular culture (Jenkins and Huzinec, 2021; Shifman, 2013). It does so by considering different modalities to discuss children's memeability: the hypermemetic logic of digital platforms, the commodification of children's image on sharenting practices, and the affective appeal of children by cuteness or cringeness.

The hypermemetic logic

Growing scholarship has engaged with memes as a pervasive element in the digital realm and a central manifestation of participatory culture (Rogers and Giorgi, 2024). In their seminal work on Internet memes, Shifman (2013, 2014) claims that the concept is fundamental to understanding the interplay between popular and digital cultures marked by copying and imitation. As a group of digital items created with awareness of each other, with common characteristics (content, form, and/or stance) and circulated, imitated, and/or transformed by many users, Internet memes are socially constructed public discourses that shape and reflect general social mindsets (Shifman, 2014). The author highlights memes as popular culture artifacts, emphasizing that pop culture and digital media shape and amplify each other in a dynamic and symbiotic relationship. Social media platforms play a crucial role in making pop culture trends go viral.

Memes enable the condensation of messages, the fast circulation of ideas, and affective responses (Milner, 2018). Furthermore, “memes are almost entirely jokes” (Milner, 2018: 48); they are images charged with parody, satire, irony, or horror, sometimes motivating action (Zulli and Zulli, 2022). They promote feelings and emotions, the primary motives for human behavior according to affect theory (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010), and they become a driving force for mobilization through expressions of sentiment (Kassing, 2020; Papacharissi, 2015). As an affective-laden element of the attention economy (Jenkins and Huzinec, 2021), memetic content is so prevalent in a contemporary participatory culture that Shifman (2014) argues we live in a hypermemetic logic.

Holowka (2018) sees Instagram communities as *archives of feelings* composed of collected memories, feelings, and experiences that lead to affective connectivity. Memes are part of this and other platform subjectivities as an “aesthetic style (often featuring a top text and bottom text) and a format for entertainment, information, or political message” (Wald, 2022: 18). As an essential feature on Instagram and other social media, memes influence “who and what is remembered and how those memories generate meaning and cultural significance” (Pybus, 2015: 239 in Holowka, 2018: 160).

Memes are heavily affect-laden (Jenkins and Huzinec, 2021). They are initially created for fun, to connect with friends, or to express personally relevant statements, opinions, or jokes (Milner, 2017), including critique. Celebrities can become the object of memes as part of events of cultural critique and backlash (Wald, 2022), which can affect their reputation—or just leave it unaffected. Particularly relevant to explaining the potential of individuals to become memes is the notion of *memeability*, referring to when a person(a) becomes a meme that, in turn, acts as a mechanism for producing stardom (Mercer and Sarson, 2020). Virality and memes have become integrated into the celebrity-making process as a vehicle to enable brand collaborations and capitalization (p. 488). Memes can be a cultural currency converted into appealing content to advertisers, entrepreneurs, media companies, and others interested in making money. Children’s images are an important component of the hypermemetic culture.

Children’s images: commodification and sharenting

In memes, original images of ordinary children, including those shared by parents, are often remixed with an added layer of meaning or intention, for example, a mean attitude

or a complex thought (Dale et al., 2017). Their visibility is often accidental, such as Marion Kelly's, the young girl who walked into a room when her father was interviewed live on BBC World in 2017 (Biddlecombe, 2017).

The valuation of childhood in visual content goes hand in hand with its commodification. Unexpected visibility has transformed Side-Eyeing Chloe or the Success Kid Sam Griner into Internet celebrities, which in turn allowed the commodification of their images in advertisements (BBC, 2021; *Bubblegum Stuff*, 2021) and as non-fungible tokens (NFTs). Indeed, four of the top five memes sold as NFTs in 2021 were anonymous children who accidentally became Internet celebrities (Newsroom, 2021). Several other popular memes are celebrity children, for example, Disney Channel celebrity Mia Talerico, from the show *Good Luck Charlie*; inherited celebrities, such as Prince Louis in Queen's Elisabeth platinum jubilee; or children of celebrities that unintentionally became memes due to their parents' sharenting, like Cristiano Ronaldo Jr (Jorge et al., 2022a). As popular culture artifacts (Shifman, 2013), these memes also transform children's online identities into marketable assets within the digital landscape.

Sharenting is a widespread practice performed by (ordinary) parents to look for support; collect memories, and inform friends and family about their children; to self-present themselves as good or prideful parents; and to advocate for children (Borda, 2015; Cataldo et al., 2022; Lopez, 2009; Tiidenberg and Baym, 2017; Verswijvel et al., 2019). Furthermore, it can also be an opportunity to commodify parenting experiences and children's images (Ruiz-Gomez, 2023). This potential is explored among what the marketing and society is calling "mummy influencers" (Jorge et al., 2022b) or—even if emergent—"dad influencers" (Campana et al., 2020), as well as among other influencers specializing in distinct areas such as lifestyle, beauty and fashion, and celebrities (Garrido et al., 2023; Jorge et al., 2022a). Sharenting turns children into emotional (Dale et al., 2017) or digital capital (Ågren, 2023) that can help influencers professionalize their content creation and escape job precarity while trying to conciliate motherhood and a successful career (Jorge et al., 2022b); or help celebrities to build a reputation, perform authenticity, and promote relatability and a closer relationship with their followers (Jorge et al., 2022a). Holiday et al. (2022) argue that sharenting is actually a representation of the parent's self, and children are presented as their extended self. This visibility is sustained by "calibrated amateurism" (Abidin, 2017), an artificial yet apparently authentic family lifestyle in which children are imbricated in the content that influencers try to create; or children are only apparently agentic, sometimes camouflaging forms of digital labor (cf. Jiang, 2023, on racialized representations). In this scenario, momfluencers frequently neglect children's privacy, relying on unconscious biases (i.e. immediate gratification, optimistic bias, integrated daily life habit, social influence, and the illusion of control) to enjoy the benefits of openness, such as emotional and economic capital (Van den Abeele et al., 2023). This raises concerns because a child often cannot provide informed consent for sharing their data online. As children's identity evolves as they grow, information shared at a young age can cause embarrassment as it may not accurately reflect their older self. Therefore, the children's right to be forgotten (the legal principle allowing the removal of personal information from public access) has become more significant in public, academic, and legal discussions, yet enforcing it remains challenging, particularly outside Europe (Bunn, 2019).

The disclosure of children's images and information on commercial sharenting practices to attract audiences seems to affect younger children more than older ones, and girls more than boys (Ruiz-Gomez, 2023). As a result of social media visibility, children may inherit fame from their microcelebrity parents and become micro-microcelebrities (Abidin, 2015). In short, when capitalizing on children's potential for visibility, they can be recipients as part of the family, as sole recipients (e.g. parents who state they put money aside for the child/ren), or as generating themselves a form of capital that can be used in the future on their own. Children may work as affective intensities that engage users in social media and, thus, generate data that are crucial to social media's economic model (Paasonen, 2018).

The affective appeal of children in digital culture

Studies show that when influencers and celebrities include their children on their social media posts, they generate more responses from the followers (Garrido et al., 2023), facilitating what Papacharissi (2015) calls an *affective engagement*. Such engagement can be ambivalent and unpredictable, occurring in conflicting forms. Jorge et al. (2022a) have explored how children's images circulated through sharenting, that is, on social media by parents and through news and entertainment media, can be widely remixed and recirculated in memes. The extreme case of Cristiano Ronaldo Jr, the oldest son of the soccer celebrity Cristiano Ronaldo, shows how his fans appropriated the cute father-son dyad (mostly into gifs), and his anti-fans used images the celebrity had shared with his son to promote cruel jokes about the father. Memeability of children thus occurs amid *affective publics* who rework, republish, and recirculate visual content (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021). These networked public formations are mobilized through expressions of sentiment, ranging from fascination to derogation (Kassing, 2020) and from humor to horror (Zulli and Zulli, 2022). These networked publics also come to the fore in collectively deciding what stories are worth spreading, to what extent, and to whom they are spread (Ural, 2023). This capacity of the publics is also part of the culture – for instance, Brazil, the context of one of our cases, is “broadly known as an impressive meme distributor [and] has a long history of generating folkloric figures in politics” (Chagas et al., 2019). So there can be a “disconnect between the actual audience consuming content posted [by parents] and that which is imagined” is “exacerbated when the characteristics of online communication such as shareability, persistence, and searchability are considered” (Barnes and Potter, 2021: 12, drawing on boyd, 2010).

Cases of children's memes, such as Zoe “Disaster Girl” Roth, the “Success Kid” Sam Griner, or the “Grinning Girl” GIF, attest to the affective responses to children's images. In looking closely at some of the bases of cultural fascination with children turned into profitable units circulating in the digital ecosystem, it became clear from our cases that not only cuteness but also cringeness were mobilized in the representation of children with affective resonance. Read affectively, cuteness and cringeness are intensities that cut through the flatline of scrolling on social media. As Jenkins and Huzinec (2021) pose, drawing on Massumi, “laughter, enjoyment, excitement, or other affective responses entice users to like and share memes” (p. 407). Engagement and further spreadability are responses to an appeal to mostly “facial expressions that encapsulate a particular emotional or affective state” (p. 408).

Cuteness is a powerful affective register that has proliferated since the turn of the millennium when there was an explosion of cute commodities, characters, foods, fashions, and fandoms (Dale et al., 2017). The cute effect was first unraveled by the Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz when he delineated the “child schema”: the physical and behavioral characteristics of young children and baby animals—for example, large head, round face, and big eyes (Glocker et al., 2009)—that arouse an involuntary desire to care in adults (Dale et al., 2017). Simon May (2019) argues that the usual explanation of the appeal of cute, that is, the attraction to children’s innocence and powerlessness and the instinct to protect them, should be situated historically as a result of the emergent valuation of childhood in the Western world from mid to the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, the appeal of cuteness can also be explained sociologically as the desire to regress to childhood in contemporary capitalism, escaping the demands and complexities of adulthood in an uncertain world (May, 2019). This category can be seen to coincide with Ågren’s (2023) category of the “sacred child,” the most common in Scandinavian influencer sharenting.

Cuteness can arise from the exaltation of the children’s innocence and spontaneity, sometimes in the form of precocity and prodigy. Marshall (2017) posits such a fascination in history when he states: “In a variety of cultural forms, children have entertained audiences through performing adultlike activities” (p. 185). However, the allure of child stars such as Shirley Temple seems to derive from combining a “simultaneously childlike and adultlike” presentation (p. 192). In the 1990s, Macaulay Culkin, entwined with his *Home Alone* character, attracted worldwide attention with the way the industry constructed him as angelical out of a “conventionally ‘cute’ look” (Chard, 2017: 110), precocious as innately able to act, but also naughty and resourceful. Adorability and freakishness hold the audience’s attention, as an affective force that bears the “promise of happiness,” as Wilson and Yochim (2015) pose, drawing on Ahmed. This cluster aligns with the “agentive child” found by Ågren (2023).

Like cuteness, cringeness lies significantly in the eye and mind of the audience—or, in this case, in their bodies, as “cringe” highlights the physical reaction many people undergo when seeing awkward and uncomfortable situations. This “intense visceral reaction” (Dahl, 2018: 8) is produced by the uneasiness of witnessing a trivial or serious situation; or of feeling that you are being watched in such a situation. Cringe is a hybrid mechanism that generates discomfort arising from the tension between amusement and embarrassment, empathy, and frustration (Havas and Sulimma, 2020). This discomfort entices viewers to respond, often with a humorous reaction. By playing with discomfort, awkwardness, and even disgust, cringe discourses play with political correctness and moral boundaries. Thus, cringe appears as another powerful affective mechanism.

A considerable portion of cringe revolves around physical taboos and strong, unpleasant expressions, which can easily be found among children. In engaging with cringe, two distinctions are important: on the one hand, between intentionality and non-intentionality, and, on the other hand, on awareness or lack thereof (Mayer et al., 2021). Among children, this is very relevant as they do not hold control over their bodies and often fall, for example; and they may incur in obsessive and repetitive behaviors as they are not socialized.

We draw on scholarship on cringe aesthetics focusing on audiovisual production (Havas and Sulimma, 2020). Cringe has also prospered in digital spaces through the attention to micro-aspects of ordinary life, and where complexity is favored over plain and direct emotions. Playing with embarrassment, mockery, and, to some degree, frustration, cringe allows comic relief to life's hardships. To our knowledge, these aspects have not been explored concerning children displayed through sharenting.

Thus, this article aims to debate the affective economies of children's images in digital culture, considering their use in influencer sharenting and their appropriation by publics through memes.

Method

In this article, we bring together the processes of affective engagement, memeability, and commodification in sharenting to address a fundamental question: How is children's memeability part of the celebrity-making process in the context of influencer sharenting? To answer this question, we pose two sub-questions: How do different sharenting narratives intersect with children's memeability? How are children's cuteness and cringeness presented by the influencers and (re)appropriated, if at all, by the affective publics in memes?

We selected two case studies of mom influencers from Brazil and Portugal, both Portuguese-speaking countries with a former colonialist connection. The first case is Brazilian Morgana Secco—at the time of data collection, in 2022, she was living in London with her husband and her 3-year-old child, Alice. In 2021, Morgana worked as a photographer and started sharing videos of her baby daughter repeating difficult words and talking fluently that went viral. That same year, Alice became very famous in Brazil, appeared in mainstream news (e.g. Freitas, 2021), and starred at the end of the year in a television ad for Itaú Bank, the biggest in Latin America. In this television ad, it was the baby saying words such as “respect” or “humanity” and a respected senior actress, Fernanda Montenegro, repeating after her. The family's main source of income came from their YouTube channel (503,000 followers in 2021 and over 829,000 by the end of 2024) and their Instagram account (3.5 million followers in 2021 and 4 million in late 2024). Morgana shares insights about family life and motherhood experiences on both platforms. The father, Luiz Schiller, regularly present in Morgana's posts and videos, left his job as a computer programmer and now helps manage social media backstage work and also produces digital content about the family.

The second case is Madalena Abecasis, a famous Portuguese influencer with over 400,000 followers on Instagram in mid-2022, and over 680,000 in late 2024; apart from Instagram, she has an account on TikTok where she posts scarcely. She is a mother of four—one teenage girl and three children (a girl and two boys) under 6 years old—from a privileged socioeconomic background. Before becoming a full-time influencer, she was a designer; as an influencer, she presents fashion and décor brands, besides products for the house and family. She has an irreverent style, using sarcastic humor to talk about daily life and motherhood experiences, often teasing influencer culture. Since 2021, she has been represented by a celebrity and influencer agency after some years of working as a full-time influencer. Her husband and father of the three youngest children seldomly appears on Instagram and does not have an account. As we will see, this article mainly focuses on how the young daughter, Júlia, is represented.

The intentional selection of these cases supports our scholarly exploration of the affective potentiality of memeability in the context of influencer culture as it intersects with sharenting in different ways. The two mothers are from Portuguese-speaking backgrounds but work differently as prominent influencers in their respective contexts: one focusing on parenting content in Brazil, and the other on lifestyle content in Portugal. This leads to distinct sharenting styles, which have resulted in unsolicited memes in the first case, whereas the other presents the child as memeable.

We purposively retrieved posts about the focal children (Alice and Júlia) from their mothers' Instagram feeds from their birth or first appearance on those accounts until October 2022. Between February and October 2022, we followed their Instagram accounts, collected posts, and saved Stories where the children were represented; and also searched hashtags and text (parents' and children's names, "meme," "Instagram," "Itaú") across different digital spaces: image search engine (Google), social media platforms, sites (BuzzFeed and Bored Panda, etc.), and repositories (Giphy) to look for memes. This generated a corpus of 64 posts and 12 stories for Morgana/Alice, and 79 posts and 20 stories for Madalena/Júlia. We performed a multimodal content analysis (Bouvier and Rasmussen, 2022) to identify the relevant themes and aesthetics of the sharenting narratives and their relation to memes or memeable presentations, paying attention to the different social media elements used to express meaning. We proceeded inductively: we built descriptive accounts of each account, developed categories (child's representation, parent's presentation, cute and cringe aesthetics, social media elements, memes, modalities of humor, modes of engagement with the audience), and then discussed themes iteratively among the team of authors.

Following Harris' (2016) example, we consider the videos and photographs as public textual resources, similar to a television program; thus, we did not ask for consent. We based this decision on three arguments: (1) the momfluencers produce content to the broadest possible audience; (2) they are widely known public figures, so researchers do not need consent from celebrities to write about them; and (3) the data were accessed from open and public online locations, such as influencers' Instagram public profiles and other open platforms (Franzke et al., 2020; Harris, 2016; Townsend and Wallace, 2016). Nevertheless, since we are also dealing with sensitive subjects—children, to avoid extending their exposure, we do not include the URLs and we use black-and-white sketches of actual images (using the free website Befunky), blur the children's faces, and reproduce captions, emojis, and hashtags translated into English (Ågren, 2023).

Results

Sharenting styles, cuteness, and cringeness

We found significantly different content strategies in the two accounts, which function as affective mechanisms to express parenting styles and engage audiences.

In one of the first Instagram posts after Alice's birth in May, 2019, Morgana Secco, an award-winning family photographer, published a beautiful image focusing only on the baby in her arms with contrasting light and shadow. The caption reads,

Because I don't want to forget this hold on my breast after feeding. Not even these rosy cheeks. Not even this fallen mouth. Not even the heat of your mini body next to me. ❤️ (Delayed photo, from when she was 9 days old because one can't post in real time 🙄).

This post sets the tone for Secco's subsequent sharenting narratives: the child is at the center of the routine and attention of the dedicated parents in a mix of a strong dose of rapture and reflexive talks about parenting challenges and dilemmas. Secco's tone is one of *enchanted devotion* narrating the investments to encourage Alice's development, prioritizing a Montessori education.

Distinctly, Madalena Abecasis is not mesmerized by the children. The Portuguese influencer stands out for a large dose of irreverence: she sees through and laughs at the children's peculiarities as she positions herself as an entertainer on Instagram. She performs ambivalent motherhood in which humor and discomfort with children's actions are combined with expressions of affection, in what we call a tone of *irreverent ambiguity*. Abecasis jokes with and about her children as much as she uses self-deprecation. As part of her digital performance, children are presented on social media for humor and moods about adventures and misadventures of maternity and the everyday life of a privileged, extended family.

These discordant sharenting styles lead to contrasting representations of the children by the two mothers on Instagram, exploring affection by cuteness and/or cringeness. Alice is presented as a source of great happiness and investment by the mesmerized mother (often accompanied by the father). Her pictures and videos are combined with extensive captions about the strategies the parents use to deal with the daily little hardships of parenting. Secco shows how the couple managed to brush the baby's teeth and later convinced the toddler to take a bath in a fun way. In an unpretentious style, the mother looks for relatability with the followers, asking what strategies work for them in similar situations.

Alice is frequently presented as charismatic, agentic, and creative, performing as a prodigy with precocious abilities (Figures 1 and 2). In one of the viral videos called "Word challenge," the caption reads: "Alice is not even 2 years old and is better than most adults. I said the last word and I even asked Schiller [father] if I had said it right. Hahahaha" (May 2021). In a complementary way, she is also presented as a curious and questioning child. In a post of May 2022, for example, Alice asks, "What is art, mom?" during a family visit to the Tate Modern Gallery. This was the cue for the mother to write a caption saying that "art teaches, provides repertoire, stimulates creativity, and opens the mind." In a previous video, to the mother's question, "What is happiness?," the girl answers spontaneously, "That's when you smile and go to the beach."

Another way to present Alice, who became more prominent in the social media account as she grew, is to show her as a creative storyteller. Highly expressive and communicative, besides being physically lovable in her expressions and gestures, the girl looks pretty comfortable in front of the camera telling stories inspired by books and her experiences.

Secco's narratives resonate with a popular fascination with (cute) girls (Projansky, 2014). Alice is blond with a round face and expressive blue eyes, embodying the ideal of a cute child. Secco frequently praises her daughter's cuteness and avoids displaying



Figure 1. “Shall we speak words in English today?”. Sponsored.

cringe expressions. Likewise, the followers repeatedly praise the child’s gracefulness but sometimes point out Alice’s sideways eye movement as strange. Politely, Secco explains that this is just a regular expression when the baby thinks about a situation or before responding to questions.

In Abecasis’ account, the young daughter, Júlia, is a central character whose identity is constructed through affective forms. One form of presentation of the child is by accentuating cringeness, constructing an antisocial personality by using pictures of the girl frowning, looking sideways, with inexpressive eyes (an absent look or half asleep) captioned with “unfriendly face,” “hard face,” “bad mood,” “not even caring what others think.” Moreover, when focusing on clothing, the mother exposes the child’s koumpounophobia (phobia of clothes buttons), first as strange to grasp and deal with, and ultimately as an obstacle to dressing her, which ultimately works to construct personality and establish intimacy around such a personal characteristic. The young girl is also portrayed as unathletic and gangling in videos where Abecasis takes advantage of multimodality on Instagram through editing and music on the children’s videos to augment the humorous effect (e.g. tripping on her feet when running).

The identity of the baby child is also constructed combining cuteness and a creative use of text and Instagram affordances. One such use is a group of posts where the (often



Figure 2. “She saw a painting on the wall at school.”

sole) caption comprises emoji(s). In photos of the early years of the girl, “little bird 🐦” (translated) or “🐦🐦🐦” mimic her position, clothes, or expression; and “👶🐦” or “👶👶👶” phatically describe when she is with the older brother or with a dog. As Júlia grew into a toddler, Abecasis played with hashtags—#julemarules, #bifabebada [drunk English girl], #julinhadobairro [little Julia from the neighborhood]—, baby nicknames—Pudina [little pudding], ⚡Julemer⚡, Jules ⚡, Jules 🐦, bimbóbifa [cheap chic English girl], Julema Ambrósio [popular surname]—or descriptions—“your niece, goddaughter, granddaughter, spirit animal [sic], méme [sic],” “superstar [sic] Julinha” [little Júlia], “mini-blogger 🐦”—to present the child’s personality, as seen from an adult’s perspective and for an adult audience. In these hashtags and descriptions, as the audience of her Instagram account grew, Abecasis combines English and Portuguese languages, often incorporating colloquialism, neologism, or semantic irony (Giorgi, 2022) along with emojis, for a humorous effect that is highly valued both in digital and popular cultures. Some hashtags are both contextualizing and “like-hunters” (Veszelszki, 2016), but also to create collections, a central affordance for parents sharing online. An example is #museudotrajedejulia [Júlia’s costume museum], which gathers 114 posts where the child is either shown with sporty clothes with affectionate or funny captions highlighting her facial and bodily expression; with classic clothes with re-entextualizing captions

related to adult situations or characters; or with festive, adorable clothes presented as a victorious choice of the mother against the child's natural inclination. Often associated with affection over cute photos are expressions such as "wanting to put her back inside me," "#yummy," and "my yummiest carrot," which go in line with a traditional interpretation of cuteness. In Abecasis' account, cuteness is entangled with humor and affective expression to construct both the child's and the mother's personae.

We also find discrepancies when analyzing the affective mechanisms Abecasis and Secco use to engage their followers through sharenting on Instagram. When Alice's videos repeating difficult words went viral in Brazil in early 2021, with several specialists commenting on news media on the baby's precocity, her mother took the opportunity to become a full-time content producer, establishing partnerships with major Brazilian brands. Secco's strategies include a combination of performed authenticity, intimacy, and affection to engage with the audience resembling Abidin's (2017) concept of "calibrated amateurism." Advocating for a naturalist and minimalist lifestyle, she usually presented herself without make-up, disclosing personal experiences to reflect on topics such as women's condition, marriage, and (mainly) parenting. The Brazilian influencer claims she only wanted to share her perspective, values, and knowledge of the world, motherhood, and children in photography but never considered being famous or making her daughter famous. Although Alice's cuteness is central in her mother's strategies to build a digital community, she says she still feels insecure about showing her daughter, constantly questioning and choosing what to share carefully (she never shows the girl crying or making tantrums, for example). Secco attributes Alice's popularity to the child's magnetism and says she lives a happy childhood in London without knowing what happens behind the screen. "As long as she is happy and having fun and our impact is positive on so many people's lives, we will continue ❤️" (July 2021).

After Júlia was born, Abecasis returned to work when she was already monetizing the account but later opted to work as a full-time influencer, justifying it as a better option for caring for the children. The narratives and aesthetic style of Abecasis combine children's cringiness and cuteness through humor to elicit engagement and invite relatability despite social privilege. One way she does that is by framing the child's expressions and actions as expressions of the mother's emotions and moods. For example, in a video of the little girl running very fast, the caption reads: "Me heading to Zara when we get released" (April 2020, during the first lockdown). Abecasis is knowledgeable of the meme culture as she often uses the word "mood" (in English); sometimes, she uses image macros with before and after (Júlia smiling on the left and crying on the right, on the last day of 2021 to describe the year). The Portuguese influencer resonates with cringe aesthetics in her ironic attention to micro-aspects of ordinary life, using humor as escapism. Her children, especially Júlia, are central characters in her narratives as a means of expressing the ability to laugh at oneself and the hardships of everyday life.

Memeability and affective publics

Morgana Secco's and Madalena Abecasis' different sharenting narratives lead to contrasting memeability strategies: the former does not promote the creation of memes by the digital publics, while the latter actively encourages it. The public response, however, comes in unexpected and unpredictable ways.

Secco's inspirational sharenting narratives seem to dispense with the use of many Instagram affordances to promote visibility or memeability. She rarely applies hashtags or image macros and typically does not use witty messages or catchphrases characteristic of meme culture. Alice's mother often portrays her as a spontaneous protagonist who narrates her experiences in her own words (e.g. the video "Reflection on the topics we approach with our children"—July 2022). Driven by affection, hundreds of thousands of Instagram followers commented very positively on those curated contents. They share thankful messages, compliments on Alice's cuteness and smartness, and their parenting experiences and doubts.

In contrast, Abecasis draws on meme culture as the basis for sharenting as shown in the previous section. She promotes memeability to engage the public in several ways. First, she re-contextualizes the child's photos or videos with generic adult emotions (therefore, distinct from just the mother's), such as (crazy) nightlife situations, hangovers, or "Monday mood." This group of posts calls for relatability with particular, banal situations from an adult audience. Second, and with an adult audience as a target, some posts use echoic irony (Giorgi, 2022) through pop cultural references, such as music, series, or films, as a re-framing of the posts. For instance, a picture of the girl with an absent look is captioned: "—How often do you see them?—All the time. They are everywhere" [sic], with no mention of the source, which rewards the audience that recognizes the dialogue from the movie *The Sixth Sense*. Third, she invites the audience to relate with and engage with her posts with children's expressions. In a video of the girl squeezing her hands up and laughing, a mixture of cuteness and cringeness, Madalena writes, "Insert caption 🤔 according to your mood:." In another video where Júlia is again squeezing hands and turning reddish (January 2020), the caption defines, as a parodic dictionary entry, her own neologism "comicho," from the Portuguese word for itching ("comichão"), which she describes as "a state of great irritation or restlessness or disturbance of the nervous system, external and extreme situations that cause itching (e.g., itching crisis; I am itchy, it makes me itch)." The caption goes on: "and now to the point: what makes you itchy?." By stimulating the audience to recognize the fleeting feeling, telling them how to convey it through the girl's expression, and asking what the cause is, Abecasis further invites affective engagement, building on cringeness and relatability.

The response from the audience is more often through comments than through meme modification or even re-shares. There were only a few cases (in our corpus) where people re-shared Abecasis' content with comments or other memes through Stories, and she re-shared for the broader audience by adding emojis (Figures 3 and 4). It was also rare for people to modify her or her children's image.

On the other hand, Secco faced a very different situation when Alice became a celebrity after starring in Itaú Bank Christmas advertising. The campaign was a huge success, promoting Alice's identity as a cute prodigy far beyond social media, and stimulating the digital publics' (re)appropriation of her identity in memes.

In the Brazilian very polarized social and political context, Alice's image was used in—what then became widely circulated—memes on different and controversial topics: political campaigns against President Bolsonaro's reelection (Figure 5), criticism of the Itaú bank or of the economic crisis (Figure 6), and even sexual jokes. Her expressive and smiling face illustrates these memes in which the texts or titles reproduce Alice's baby



Figure 3. “Madalena, I think this is just like Julia.”

speech (in Brazilian Portuguese, babies often change the letter “r” to “l”), promoting an affective appeal by the contrast of cuteness with the seriousness of political problems perpassing Brazil. In addition to memes, Alice’s image was used by companies and even public bodies in publications about services offered (e.g. mobilization for COVID-19 vaccination).

Eventually, in January 2022, her mother posted an Instagram Story disapproving of the use of her child’s image in these situations:

I wanted to clarify that we did not give authorization to any of them (the memes) and we disagree with associating Alice’s image with political or religious purposes, for example.



Figure 4. “Me in life . . . when someone takes me to an amusement park #juliawefighttogether.”

Furthermore, we didn’t even authorize the use of her image by companies or institutions, so we don’t authorize campaigns, publicity, sales of products or association with brands. So, I came here to ask you for common sense when posting and if you are in any of the situations I mentioned, please don’t post. If you see posts with these connotations, ask to delete them.

Some Brazilian news media reverberated the mother’s public complaints debating the children’s image rights, for example, “Can an image of a child be used to make memes?” (Arimathea, 2022). The case is described as complex because the right of expression collides with the protection of children. However, the experts interviewed are unanimous in defending the child’s legal right to physical, psychological, and moral integrity, including the preservation of the image. Some plead in favor of a “shared responsibility” between parents and society on what should or should not be associated with the child’s image.

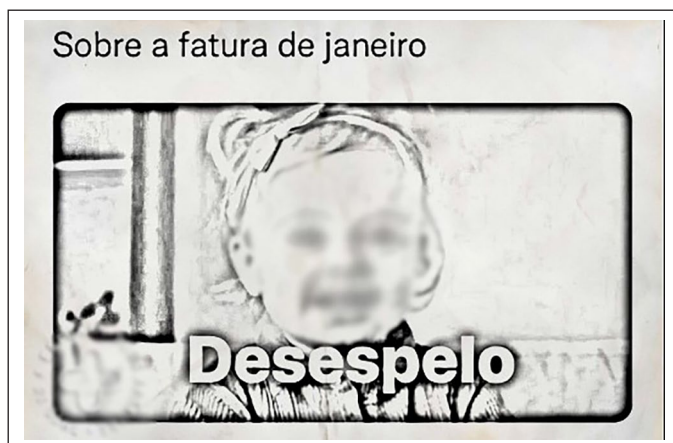


Figure 5. "About January bill/Despelation" (meme).



Figure 6. "TRAMP BOLSONALO" (meme).

Discussion

Unlike most popular memes of children, generated accidentally due to non-commercial forms of sharenting, the cases we analyze in this article already hold a solid digital capital (Ågren, 2023). This capital was created through the commercial sharenting narratives as a representation of how parents (mothers, in our case studies) wish to present their children's digital identities (Van den Abeele et al., 2024). On the one hand, Secco presents Alice blending the sacred and agentic child categories by Ågren (2023), and cuteness is a tool to promote engagement by enchantment in what we call an *inspirational sharenting*, that is, an *adorable* kid and a model for good, *enchanted and devoted* parenting. On the other hand, Abecasis privileges cringe as a modality to represent her children, especially Júlia, and she constructs her personality as *adorkable*. She is not (simply) inviting the audience to laugh *at* the children because they are still unsocialized and may

show this awkward behavior; instead, she is eliciting the audience to engage with them showing imperfection as an expression of authenticity and vulnerability. This form of *transgressive sharenting* builds up from the irreverent ambiguity toward parenting and plays with unexpected and socially repressed ways to refer to children to promote engagement.

What these cases also show is how meme culture is unpredictable and uncontrollable, resulting from audiences' ambiguous engagement with these sharenting narratives as well as the situatedness of the contexts of those affective publics. To Secco, a mummy influencer, memeability is an unsolicited consequence of her inspirational sharenting and proof of the celebrification of young Alice as a cute and precocious digital persona in Brazil. In the Brazilian prolific memetic culture, the girl's image was appropriated for playful and parodic engagement, neglecting her privacy, reputation, and well-being, despite her mother's public complaint. The difficulty of drawing the line on what uses would be acceptable or not for the child or her legal representatives, and especially to enforce it, was brought to evidence.

In contrast, Abecasis' investment in memes appears as an extension of using humor as a central strategy to engage audiences. As a lifestyle creator, not a mummy influencer, children are part of her extended self (Holiday et al., 2022). Her children, especially the young girl Júlia, are involved in representing generic adult emotions, such as echoic irony (Giorgi, 2022), or showing children's funny expressions exploring cringe aesthetics. This encouraged memeability does not exceed the limit of her community of followers and only has minor resonance among it in terms of modifying and circulating content. The lack of amplification here might be explained by a more inertial digital culture in Portugal, as well as by her irreverent, unapologetically affluent tone, combined with the focus on lifestyle. While this memeability commodifies a popular culture trend in which humor and irony are central aspects, it does not support the celebrification of the child, who is an extension of her mother's self and not a celebrity like Alice, as much as it intensifies the connection between Madalena and the audience, expressed through platform built-in engagement such as reactions, comments, and (re-)shares.

Conclusion

This article contributes to a better understanding of the affective economy of children on social media through the critical analysis of influencer sharenting narratives emphasizing children's cuteness and cringeness. Our case studies show that cute and cringe affects are far from biological and rather constructed by the mothers' communicative strategies and exploration of the platforms' affordances for consequent commodification, resonating larger trends in the intersection of pop and digital cultures. Furthermore, by analyzing how memeability can be both an unsolicited product of the intense visibility of children through social media *and* a calculated strategy to increase emotional engagement, the article highlights the affective intensities at play around commercial sharenting as well as meme cultures and wider popular culture, including their unpredictable and ambivalent implications.

The results show new implications for the academic and social debate surrounding the privacy and exploitation of children on digital platforms. While influencer

sharenting can have benefits such as recognizing children's role in the family and promoting positive parenting (Jorge et al., 2022a), there are significant risks frequently neglected by many parent influencers (Beuckels et al., 2024). The two girls in this study, as other celebrities and influencers' children, face the challenge of growing in front of the public eyes with their names, images, life stories, and personal experiences widely known. Considering children's rights, this compromises their security and could impact the present and future personal relationships. They are also susceptible to media scrutiny, considering that children are often exposed to the same negative reporting tactics as adults (Hartley, 1998). Moreover, girls are at greater risk as media attention frequently focuses on their private lives and can easily shift from adoration to disdain (Projansky, 2014).

What this article reveals is how the *hypermetic logic* (Shifman, 2014) amplifies and complicates these risks. As seen in Alice's case, the achievement of celebrity status can lead to memeability, which increases these threats. The anonymity and uncontrollability of memes creators and disseminators, combined with the inherent humor and sarcasm of memetic culture, can lead to attacks to the honor and reputation of the child. All this happens without the informed consent of children, who may not begin to understand the implications of having their image and private life displayed in sharenting content and memes until later in life. More information and capacity on the connection between sharenting and memeability should be provided to influencers (and regular parents), alerting to the breadth, visibility, persistence, and replicability of children's content in remixed memes (Jorge et al., 2022b). The children's memeability should also be taken into consideration on the emerging debate on children's rights to be forgotten and its implications for social media platforms' regulation and for affective publics' social responsibilities.

Considering the inescapable limitations of an exploratory study, for future research, we suggest that qualitative scholars compare how memeability is being used in different contexts traversing popular and digital cultures, among mother and father creators, and through longer periods. Quantitative research might focus on the extent to which different forms of memeability are used by ordinary as well as creator parents and how they are engaged with, and reappropriated by, the digital publics.

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