Consumed by influence: the role of social media in shaping maternal identity and product choices during complementary feeding

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Introduction: In today's digital age, social media platforms radically transform consumption practices and identity construction. This study examines the impact of influencers' product recommendations on Instagram on mothers' product preferences during the complementary feeding period. The research reveals that consumption practices shaped by influencer guidance are based on symbolic and social identity motivations and functional needs.

Methods: The study used a mixed-methods approach, surveying 711 mothers in Türkiye with children aged 6–48 months. Quantitative data were analyzed statistically, while open-ended responses were thematically analyzed to explore symbolic meanings and consumption patterns.

Results: Influencer-following mothers showed a stronger tendency to prioritize peer recommendations and branded BLW products. Items purchased based on influencer suggestions were often linked to social approval, visibility, and the construction of a modern parenting identity. However, over 80% of participants later expressed disappointment, citing issues of limited functionality or questionable necessity. Additionally, age-based differences emerged in both motivations for following influencer recommendations and post-purchase evaluations.

Discussion: The findings indicate that influencer-promoted products serve as symbols of modern, conscious motherhood but often fail to meet practical expectations. Influencer culture fosters FoMO, driving mothers toward social approval and intensifying emotional labor. While younger mothers engage with influencer content as part of a digital habitus, older mothers use it for symbolic inclusion. Notably, mothers aged 40+ and 18–29 reported similar levels of satisfaction, suggesting that their relationships with influencers were different yet equally impactful.

KEYWORDS

Instagram influencers, social media, baby-led weaning, FoMO, maternal identity, symbolic consumption, generational differences

1 Introduction

In today's rapidly advancing digital world, social media platforms significantly shape communication between individuals, consumption habits, and identity construction. Image-oriented social media environments, such as Instagram, have a significant impact on individuals' consumption practices and social identity performances. Influencer marketing is

central to this transformation, generating normative pressures in many areas, ranging from consumer product choices to lifestyle choices. Within these dynamics, mothers become responsible for organizing their children's care and constructing socially visible and validated parental identities.

The Baby-Led Weaning (BLW) method, which has grown increasingly popular in recent years, is widely recognized as an approach that encourages infants to practice self-feeding during the complementary feeding period. However, BLW has evolved beyond just a feeding method; it has become a symbol of modern parenting identity. BLW practices offered by influencers have become both a health-oriented choice for mothers and a strategy to adapt to current and conscious parenting standards.

Underlying this visibility pressure is the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) effect, which is widely observed on social media platforms. Individuals avoid missing out on current trends and losing their social visibility, especially in practices they associate with their social identities. In an identity category with intense social meaning, such as motherhood, this effect becomes even more pronounced; buying the right products, applying the proper methods, and making these practices visible become essential parts of mothers' efforts to gain social approval.

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's theory of consumption provides an essential source for conceptualizing this process. According to Baudrillard, consumption in modern societies is based on the symbolic and signifying values of objects rather than their use value. In this context, BLW products purchased by mothers not only respond to the physiological needs of children but also serve as signifiers representing the identity of conscious, modern, and attentive parenthood.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of Instagram influencers on mothers' product choices and maternal identity performances from a cultural perspective. The study evaluates this effect through the products used during the complementary feeding period. The study examines how influencer guidance influences product preferences, highlighting how symbolic meanings precede functionality in these preferences, and how the FoMO effect shapes motherhood practices.

To understand how mothers in Türkiye use and relate to social media, the sociocultural context of early motherhood and the country's high digital engagement must be taken into account. According to the latest national statistics, the average age at first birth in Türkiye reached approximately 27 years in 2024, with the overall mean age of mothers nearing 29 years (TÜİK, 2025). Türkiye has one of the world's highest levels of Instagram penetration, with over 63 million active users and robust engagement among women aged 25–34 (NapoleonCat, 2025). Mothers increasingly turn to these platforms not only for informational support but also as spaces for self-expression and identity negotiation within collaborative parenting cultures (Ünlü, 2019). According to the Influencer Marketing Status Report of Creatorden (2023), 86% of women in Türkiye are more inclined to purchase from a brand they have not previously bought from after interacting with it on social media. Reflecting this environment, 97.7% of marketing professionals in Türkiye have used Instagram for influencer collaborations at least once (Creatorden, 2023). Together, these sociocultural and digital dynamics position Türkiye as a highly relevant setting for examining how influencer-driven content shapes maternal identity, consumption practices, and parenting norms.

2 Background

2.1 Consumption society from Baudrillard's perspective

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard asserts that modern society is a society of consumption, and that everyday life derives meaning from objects and images. Baudrillard (1970) states that this relationship has undergone a radical transformation in modern consumer society as follows: "In all past civilizations, durable objects, tools or buildings outlived generations of people, whereas today we are the ones who watch them being born, developing and dying." According to Baudrillard, today's individuals consume objects not only for their use value, but also for the symbolic and signifier values they carry. In this way, beyond their functionality, products have become instruments of social status, belonging, and identity narratives. Baudrillard's understanding of consumption offers a crucial theoretical framework for understanding influencer culture and the consumption habits it shapes.

Featherstone (2013) emphasizes that the postmodern consumer society has created a new profile specific to consumers. This profile involves individuals leaving behind their old habits and connections to transform their lives into projects. In other words, individuals socially characterize themselves through the products they own.

Baudrillard's conceptualization of the "system of objects" (1968) reveals that sign relations between objects guide individuals' consumption behavior. In this context, advertising presents objects not merely as functional tools but as signs loaded with meanings. Advertisements appeal not to rational needs but to the social positions individuals aspire to; thus, consumption becomes a process of constructing meaning. According to Baudrillard (1968), in today's society, representations of real objects, such as images and symbols, are consumed more than the objects themselves. While the product can be physically consumed, we can only understand its meaning through advertising.

Adorno (2004) argues that the growing surplus and variety of consumer goods in modern capitalist societies make individuals increasingly dependent on consumption habits. He defines the unnecessary and externally imposed desires introduced by the culture industry as "false need." These needs, rather than serving genuine human wellbeing, function to sustain the mechanisms of production and the continuity of the economic system. Within this structure, individuals internalize the imperatives of consumption while believing that they are exercising free choice.

According to Adorno (2007), the diversity of products offered by industrial production reshapes individuals' perceptions of what constitutes a need. As the range of available goods expands, the distinction between what is essential and what is superfluous becomes increasingly blurred, leading to the proliferation of false needs. In such a context, consumers find it more difficult to determine their own preferences, and consumption becomes not an act of autonomy but a response to systemic conditioning.

From this perspective, the role of social media influencers constitutes a process of meaning production that transcends traditional advertising strategies. Influencers present the products they recommend not through their functional benefits, but as indicators of a lifestyle, modernity, conscious parenting, or ideal motherhood. Especially in the experience of motherhood, practices

such as BLW are often associated with specific products (silicone plates, glass graters, baby bibs, etc.), transforming individual care practices into a display of identity.

2.2 Hyperreality and digital media practices

Baudrillard's (1981) concept of hyperreality posits that in postmodern society, individuals' perception of reality is shaped by the constant reproduction of images and simulations. Hyperreality is a world of simulations that replace real experiences, where reality is indistinguishable from its copies. In hyperreality, rather than directly experiencing the "real," individuals experience a sense of reality through the fictionalized representations offered by the media. Moving away from reality within a social construct of imitations makes distinguishing right and wrong challenging (Şaylan, 2009). This situation leads to the prominence of image objects over their functionality in consumption practices.

Today, like bloggers, individuals who produce content about motherhood on social media platforms are often called "influencers who are experts in the field of motherhood" (Abidin, 2014). With the proliferation of visual-oriented social media platforms, such as Instagram, mom bloggers have also turned to these platforms, where they continue to share posts and experiences related to motherhood.

Social media influencers are among the primary actors in this hyperreality order. While promoting products, influencers create fictional images that represent not only the usage features but also a particular lifestyle, an idealized parenting practice, and social taste. Media theorist Nick Couldry (2012) argues that digital media practices are deeply intertwined with everyday life and play a central role in shaping social norms. By consistently promoting certain parenting practices (e.g., BLW, disciplinary methods, play styles), influencers pave the way for establishing a norm. Couldry's social theory of digital media use argues that people's media-related actions, such as sharing, the desire to be liked, and gaining followers, have become a new social ritual. From this perspective, modern mothers may also adopt the ritual of posting on social media by the "good mother" norm, leading to the collective normalization of certain mothering practices.

Christanti et al. (2021) demonstrate that "Instagrammable" content shared on Instagram is often filtered, edited, and distorted by users, and discuss how this content creates a new level of reality within the framework of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. The study argues that the images through which users represent themselves are no longer reality but rather simulacra of reality; thus, the identities presented on social media are reconstructed within a hyperreality.

During the transition to parenthood, social media platforms provide mothers with an important means of maintaining social connections and a sense of normalcy in their social lives, particularly as they reduce face-to-face interactions and take time away from work (Bartholomew et al., 2012). Chee et al. (2023) found that for parents experiencing a challenging transition to parenthood, whether pregnant or in the early stages of parenthood, social media provides an easily accessible and relatable community where peers can explore and discuss topics related to pregnancy, childbirth, and early parenthood. While this aspect of social media influencers appears to be of great benefit to pregnant or new parents, the studies included in their review show that interaction with influencers may also pose the potential for unhelpful or even harmful interactions. Regarding this harmful interaction, Ouvrein (2022) notes in their study that mothers and first-time mothers regularly visit the Instagram profiles of maternal influencers and explains the relationship between this exposure and perceived parental self-efficacy, given that the content on these profiles often represents motherhood as perfect and unattainable. Based on the results, it can be concluded that mothers who visit maternal influencers' profiles more frequently have lower scores on the parental self-efficacy scale.

2.3 FoMO and social identity construction

Another important concept associated with social media use is FoMO, which refers to the fear of missing out. FoMO is defined as a persistent anxiety that one is missing out on positive or advantageous experiences experienced by others (Przybylski et al., 2013). It is associated with a compulsive need to control social media and stay connected, often leading to emotional and mental stress (Przybylski et al., 2013; Casale et al., 2018; Alabri, 2022). However, it is not only an anxiety-producing emotional state at the individual level; it also functions as an essential mechanism of social identity construction in contemporary consumer culture (Przybylski et al., 2013). Individuals experience FoMO not only out of anxiety about missing out on opportunities, but also out of a desire for visibility and acceptance within social groups.

Kirkpatrick and Lee (2022) found that jealousy and anxiety levels increased in new mothers exposed to idealized motherhood posts on Instagram. In particular, it was observed that mothers with a high tendency to compare with others perceived their parenting skills as lower in the face of the perfect home and family pictures they saw on social media (Kirkpatrick and Lee, 2022).

Influencer culture reinforces FoMO by constantly reproducing the need for social visibility. Especially on visual-intensive platforms such as Instagram, the lifestyle, motherhood practices, and parenting approaches presented by influencers create normative pressure on individuals. In an identity category such as motherhood, which is socially loaded with intense meanings, the FoMO effect deepens even more.

Chee et al. (2023) systematically reviewed the literature to determine what is known about how following 'influencers' and 'bloggers' on social media affects the experiences and decision-making processes of pregnant women and new parents. They identified four key themes: "information sharing," "support," "identity," and "monetization." The emergence of the concept of "identity" as a distinct theme may indicate that influencers play a key role in shaping users' online self-perceptions. This suggests that influencer content may contribute to how individuals present and understand their identities in a hyper-mediated environment.

2.4 New momism and intensive motherhood

The concept of motherhood has been shaped by cultural, social, and ideological structures throughout history. In today's popular culture, motherhood has transformed from an individual experience

into an intense identity project imposed by the media and social norms (Woodward, 2003). In this context, through popular culture, motherhood experiences are reduced to socially acceptable roles, and motherhood is reconstructed within the framework of certain norms (Green, 2012).

Feminist theories also offer a critical perspective for understanding modern ideals of motherhood. Hays (1996) introduced the ideology of "intensive mothering" to the literature by defining the level of sacrifice and perfectionism expected of mothers as the cultural norm. According to this ideology, a "good mother" should devote most of her time, energy, and resources to raising children and be meticulous and selfless in meeting all the needs of her children. Douglas and Michaels (2004) named the new ideology of motherhood glorified by the media as "New Momism." New Momism includes a discourse that motherhood is the ultimate and most valuable complement to a woman's identity. However, to achieve this, a mother must constantly improve herself, make the right consumption choices, and do "the best" for her children. This discourse is like an updated, neoliberalized version of the 1950s housewife ideal (Douglas and Michaels, 2004).

In an experimental study conducted by Germic et al. (2021), the effect of idealized perfect mother" profiles on Instagram versus more realistic, unfiltered representations of motherhood on mothers' perceptions of their parenting competence was examined. Within the framework of the 'new momism' ideology, the researchers found that highly curated, perfect mother content caused mothers to feel inadequate; in contrast, more natural and unfiltered content increased mothers' perceptions of self-efficacy in parenting. These findings suggest that overly idealized influencer portrayals can undermine maternal self-esteem, while authentic depictions may empower mothers. Similarly, Moujaes and Verrier (2020) have linked social media to maternal wellbeing through a survey study focusing on the intense pressures of motherhood in the Instagram era. They emphasize how social comparison on Instagram can negatively impact mothers' mental health and how the fierce ideology of motherhood in the digital age can increase stress.

Influencers can make perfectionist norms visible by presenting idealized scenes of motherhood and exerting explicit and implicit pressure on mothers. Such pressure can represent not only the correct approach to nutrition but also a motherhood identity equipped with the right choices, conveyed through practices such as BLW. In recent years, numerous new approaches to mother-infant health and care have gained popularity, mainly due to the influence of social media. BLW, the method based on self-feeding during the transition to complementary feeding, is one of the most striking examples. The BLW method, conceptualized by Rapley and Murkett (2008), has been discussed in the academic literature, and some studies have suggested that it may positively affect infants' eating behavior.

As the BLW method gained widespread popularity on social media, it began to be recognized as one of the symbols of "good motherhood." Pearce and Rundle (2022) examined messages on parenting forums and evaluated parents' discourse and experiences regarding the BLW method through thematic analysis. Based on the findings, parents who practiced BLW generally defined this method as a philosophy/ethic and emphasized values such as trusting the baby, sitting down to eat with the family, encouraging the baby's interest in food, and making eating a social experience. Regarding parenting norms, some mothers believed that practicing BLW made them "better parents," but this could also put pressure on them.

3 Methodology

This study is designed as an exploratory and explanatory research aiming to examine the effects of Instagram influencer promotions on mothers' product acquisition decisions during the complementary feeding period within the framework of consumption culture and social identity construction. The study primarily collected quantitative data; additionally, the cultural analysis dimension was enriched with qualitative data obtained through open-ended questions. The study focuses on understanding the sociocultural processes involved in reconstructing motherhood identity within the context of digital consumption culture.

The study participants were mothers residing in Türkiye with children aged 6–48 months. The sample consisted of mothers with children currently in a complementary feeding period or who had recently completed. Additionally, attention was paid to whether these mothers followed mother-baby influencers on Instagram. The sampling strategy followed a purposive and snowball sampling approach. Participants were reached primarily through digital platforms frequently used by mothers in Türkiye, including Instagram, Facebook support groups, and WhatsApp and Telegram groups where mothers exchange information. These platforms were selected intentionally to enable access to both influencer-following and non-following mothers. Participants were then encouraged to share the survey within their networks. While the total number of people reached cannot be determined due to the organic nature of distribution, 898 responses were collected. After excluding incomplete or inconsistent responses, data from 711 participants, comprising 521 influencer-following mothers and 190 non-following mothers, were included in the analysis. The demographics of the participants were presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Demographics of the participants.

Variable	Group	Follower	Non-follower
		n (%)	*n* (%)
Number of children	1	420 (80.6)	115 (60.5)
	2	86 (16.5)	66 (34.7)
	3 and above	15 (2.9)	9 (4.8)
Age	18–29	104 (20.1)	25 (13.2)
	30–39	383 (73.5)	140 (73.6)
	40 and above	34 (6.5)	25 (13.2)
Education	Elementary	1 (0.2)	3 (1.6)
	High school	26 (5)	21 (11.1)
	Bachelor	347 (66.6)	118 (62.1)
	Postgraduate	147 (28.2)	48 (25.2)
Occupation	Civil servant	158 (30.3)	46 (24.2)
	Private sector employee	194 (37.3)	74 (38.9)
	Unemployed	169 (32.4)	70 (36.8)
Income level	Low	44 (8.5)	14 (7.4)
	Middle	418 (80.2)	155 (81.5)
	High	59 (11.3)	21 (11.1)

n, number; %, percentage.

The survey form included Likert scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions about participants' demographic information, influencer following, and social media usage habits, product acquisition motivations, evaluations of the functionality and necessity of purchased products, and the symbolic meanings attributed to products. A Likert scale is presented with five subsequent scales, as (1) for "Strongly disagree," (2) for "Disagree," (3) for "Neutral," (4) for "Agree," and (5) for "Strongly agree" and as (1) for "Not important," (2) for "Slightly important," (3) for "Moderately important," (4) for "Important" and (5) for Very Important. Experiences with products acquired through BLW applications were thoroughly examined. In order to assess the age-related tendencies in the study, the influencer-following participants were studied in three groups based on age decades. The first age group included the participants ranging between 18 and 29, the second group ranging between 30 and 39, and the third group 40 and above, respectively. The full list of survey questions can be accessed in the Supplementary material.

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 27.0 (IBM Corp, 2020). Frequency analysis was applied to the responses to categorical questions based on the participants' demographic data, and the findings were presented in the form of "n" and "%." Extreme values were examined for continuous variables; the normality of the distribution was also checked graphically using Skewness and Kurtosis values. For variables showing a normal distribution, the mean, standard deviation, median, minimum, and maximum values were calculated. Independent samples t-test and ANOVA were used to compare groups, while the chi-square test examined relationships between categorical variables. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Responses to the open-ended survey questions were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Recurring concepts and expressions were grouped into themes using an inductive approach during the coding process. In the first phase, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data through repeated readings of the responses. All open-ended comments were transcribed, cleaned, and compiled into a single dataset, allowing the researcher to approach the material holistically. Initial codes were then generated inductively. In the next phase, two coders independently grouped and organized similar codes into candidate themes. Coding and theme development were conducted in Microsoft Excel using a color-coding system (Bree and Gallagher, 2016), which helped distinguish categories and ensure systematic comparison across cases. In constructing the theme, attention was paid to the explicit content and background meanings of participants' statements, as well as to implicit motivations and contextual clues embedded in their narratives. Themes were refined through an iterative process of reviewing, merging, and reorganizing coded segments to ensure internal coherence and clear boundaries between themes.

This study was approved by the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee for Social and Human Sciences of Istanbul Technical University (Decision No: 455). The study's purpose was clearly communicated to all participants. Data collection was voluntary, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

TABLE 2 Reasons for following influencers by mothers who follow influencers.

Variable	n	%
To have information about the foods/recipes you can feed your baby during the complementary feeding period	440	84.5
Identifying baby care needs	303	58.2
To know about infant development	293	56.2
To know about baby care	268	51.4
To know about health	211	40.5
Providing opportunities for influencers to connect with other moms and parents	146	28
Staying up-to-date and staying on top of what is being discussed in your social circle	106	20.3
Identifying yourself with the influencer	53	10.2
Influencers create community and support groups	51	9.8
Thinking that influencers are modern	28	5.4

n, number; %, percentage.

All data were evaluated anonymously and in full compliance with the confidentiality and ethical standards of research.

4 Findings

4.1 Influencers' impact on product preferences

The influencer-following participants were asked why they follow those accounts. The participants more frequently reported that the reasons for following the influencers were to obtain information about foods and recipes for their babies, to identify baby care needs and to gain information about baby development (Table 2).

The participants were asked to rate the factors they consider when selecting products related to complementary feeding using a Likert scale. The responses of the mothers who follow influencers were compared with those of mothers who do not. We observed a statistically significant difference between mothers who follow influencers and those who do not, regarding similar products used by parents in their social circle ($p = 0.002$). The importance level was higher in the influencer-following mothers Even though we did not observe a statistical significance, we may mark a value close to statistically significant difference between those two mothers groups regarding the importance level of recommendations from friends and relatives when selecting products during the complementary feeding period ($p = 0.053$)

TABLE 3 Comparison of factors considered in complementary feeding product selection according to influencer following.

Variable	Group	n	M ± SD	Mdn (Min–Max)	p
Recommendation of friends and relatives	Follower	521	3.18 ± 1.05	3 (1–5)	0.053
	Non-follower	190	3.00 ± 1.15	3 (1–5)	
Use by other parents in the social environment	Follower	521	3.45 ± 1.13	4 (1–5)	0.002
	Non-follower	190	3.15 ± 1.21	3 (1–5)	

n, number; M, Mean; SD, standard deviation; Mdn, Median; Min, minimum value; Max, maximum value.

TABLE 4 Thematic analysis results on the contribution of influencer following to participants.

Theme	Participant rate (%)
Following product recommendations	26.5
Information	24.5
Learning additional food recipes	17.7
Comparing the experience of a baby of a similar age/month	10.6
Feeling that you cannot be alone	10.0
Stay up-to-date	8.4
Motivation	2.3

Similarly, the importance level of influencer-following mothers is relatively higher than the other group (Table 3).

4.2 FoMO and the desire for social approval

The participants who follow influencers were asked an open-ended question about the contribution of influencer following to participants, and their responses were subjected to thematic analysis. According to the thematic analysis results, influencers more frequently contributed to participants following product recommendations, gaining information, and learning additional food recipes. (Table 4).

The participants were also presented with Likert scale statements regarding the products they purchased through influencer recommendations. Their evaluations indicate that these motivations came into play. Stronger effects on social identity and approval were represented in Table 5.

Following identifying the overall tendency of motherhood practice in influencer-following participants, the study focused on identifying a certain age group among all influencer-following mothers and their perceptions of the influence of influencers on the products they purchase. The analysis was conducted with the results of Likert scale, and done by ANOVA test. A statistically significant difference was observed in the age of mothers and their use of products recommended by influencers, which creates more common ground with other mothers in their social circle ($p = 0.023$). A *Post Hoc* analysis was conducted to determine which group the difference originated from. The test results showed a significant difference both between mothers aged 18–29

TABLE 5 The effect of using products recommended by influencers on social identity and approval.

Variable	n	M ± SD	Mdn (Min–Max)
Buying and using these products reinforces my identity as a mother.	521	4.06 ± 0.98	4 (1–5)
By using these products, I have more in common with other moms around me.	521	3.78 ± 1.14	4 (1–5)
Using these products makes me feel accepted and respected in my social circle.	521	4.27 ± 0.99	5 (1–5)
Using these products makes me feel like a modern and up-to-date mom.	521	3.72 ± 1.20	4 (1–5)
Using these products makes me think I fulfill my motherhood responsibilities more consciously and effectively.	521	3.70 ± 1.20	4 (1–5)
Using these products helps me to be appreciated by other moms around me.	521	4.16 ± 1.03	4 (1–5)
By using these products, I am following trends in social media about motherhood.	521	3.61 ± 1.27	4 (1–5)
These products give me confidence in my decisions about motherhood.	521	3.70 ± 1.20	4 (1–5)
Thanks to these products, I can show my social circle that I made the best choice for my child	521	4.06 ± 1.12	4 (1–5)
Using these products makes me feel that I am on the right path for the care of my child.	521	3.57 ± 1.23	4 (1–5)

n, number; M, Mean; SD, standard deviation; Mdn, Median; Min, minimum value; Max, maximum value.

and those aged 40 and above and between mothers aged 30–39 and 40 and above. As mothers age, the belief that using products recommended by influencers increases the likelihood of having more common ground with other mothers in their surroundings.

TABLE 6 The relationship of the effect of the use of products recommended by influencers on social identity and approval with the age of the participants.

Variable	Groups	n	M ± SD	Mdn	p
By using these products, I have more in common with other moms around me	18–29	104	3.60 ± 1.20	4	0.023
	30–39	383	3.80 ± 1.12	4	
	40 and above	34	4.21 ± 1.07	5	
By using these products, I am following trends in social media about motherhood	18–29	104	3.34 ± 1.25	3	0.037
	30–39	383	3.66 ± 1.26	4	
	40 and above	34	3.85 ± 1.35	4	

n, number; M, Mean; SD, standard deviation; Mdn, Median.

Also, a statistically significant difference was obtained in mothers' perception of products recommended by influencers, based on their age, and their perception of following social media trends ($p = 0.037$). A *Post Hoc* analysis was conducted to determine which group the difference originated from. The test results showed a difference between the mothers aged 18–29 and those aged 30–39, and between the mothers aged 18–29 and those aged above 40. As mothers age, the perception of keeping up with social media trends by using products that influencers recommended becomes more apparent (Table 6).

4.3 Orientation to BLW products and post-purchase regret and false needs

Within the study's scope, the participants were asked an open-ended question about the products they considered necessary for their children's complementary feeding process and their preferred brand names. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis into two groups: participants who follow influencers and those who do not. The mothers who follow influencers frequently mention brand names in their product descriptions. Among the most frequently mentioned brands are Philips Avent, Kiwi, Yoyko steam cookers, Ikea high chairs, Oioi silicone baby sets, Stanley, and Baby Plus thermos. The product mentioned most frequently in this group was the highchair, followed by silicone baby feeding sets, glass graters, and steam cookers. BLW-specific tools, such as fruit nets, thermoses, and steam-cooking appliances, were also mentioned at lower rates (Table 7). The mothers who do not follow influencers, on the other hand, did not show a tendency to mention brands in their product descriptions. The most frequently mentioned product in this group was the highchair, followed by silicone feeding sets, steam cookers, and glass graters (Table 8).

Participants were asked to evaluate the products they purchased based on influencer recommendations in an open-ended question, and their responses were analyzed using a thematic analysis. 80.8% of participants stated that the products they purchased based on influencer recommendations were not as functional as advertised or did not fully address their needs (Table 9). Among negative evaluations, questioning the necessity of the products accounted for

TABLE 7 Analysis results on the products that influencer followers consider necessary in the complementary feeding process.

Product type	Participant rates (%)
Highchair	47.7
Silicone feeding sets	15.9
Steamer (Electronic)	12.8
Glass grater	11.8
Steaming apparatus (Manuel)	8.2
Fruit mesh	5.6
Thermos	4.1

TABLE 8 Analysis results on the products that participants who do not follow influencers consider necessary in the complementary feeding process.

Product type	Participant rates (%)
Highchair	39.0
Silicone feeding sets	14.6
Steaming apparatus (Manuel)	12.1
Steamer (Electronic)	7.3
Glass grater	7.3
Fruit mesh	4.9
Thermos	4.9

TABLE 9 Evaluation of products purchased with influencer recommendation.

Evaluation	Percentage (%)
Positive	19.2
Negative	80.8

TABLE 10 Negative evaluation categories.

Code	Percentage (%)
Necessity	50.8
Function	23.8
Child adaptation	9.0
Hygiene (Odor Problems)	6.6
Quality	3.3
Duration of use	3.3
Price	2.5
Environmentalism	0.9

the highest percentage, while factors such as functionality and child adaptation also attracted attention (Table 10).

Following the overall tendency for post-purchase regret and its main reasons were examined, it is investigated whether age of influencer-following mothers is effective on revealed tendency, their thoughts on influencer product promotions, and the products they purchased as a result of these promotions. The analysis was conducted with the results of Likert scale and done by ANOVA test.

When comparing age groups, there is a statistically significant difference in the influence of some influencers' recommendations on

purchasing decisions based on trends rather than needs ($p = 0.049$). A *Post Hoc* analysis revealed that the test results showed a difference between mothers aged 18–29 and those aged 30–39. As participants get older, their interest in purchasing products because it is a trend increases.

Age was also found to be a statistically significant factor for another dimension of regret: specifically, a statistically significant difference emerged in their understanding of the delayed realization that the purchased products were functionally similar or identical to those they already possessed ($p = 0.007$). A *Post Hoc* analysis was conducted to determine which group the difference originated from. The test results showed a difference between the mothers aged 18–29 and those aged 30–39. The mothers aged 30–39 were more likely to notice that some products purchased based on influencer recommendations had similar or identical functions after purchase.

Additionally, a statistically significant difference was found among age groups in their understanding that most baby feeding products purchased due to influencer recommendations could have been substituted with traditional methods ($p = 0.018$). A *Post Hoc* analysis was conducted to determine which group the difference originated from. The test results indicated that the difference was driven by higher average of mothers aged 30–39.

Finally, there is a statistically significant difference among age groups in the awareness that some recommended products are purchased solely due to their popularity, despite recognizing these products are unnecessary ($p = 0.007$). A *Post Hoc* analysis showed a difference between mothers aged 18–29 and those aged 30–39. The mothers aged 30–39 were more likely to believe that some products purchased based on influencer recommendations were chosen solely because they were popular (Table 11).

5 Discussion

5.1 The signifier value of consumption: a Baudrillard reading

The findings of this study align with Baudrillard's (1970) proposition that consumption practices in late modernity may be shaped more by symbolic meaning than by purely functional considerations. Quantitative data appear to support this symbolic orientation: influencer-following mothers reported that using the products advertised by influencers reinforced their maternal identity (4.06 ± 0.98), increased their sense of social acceptance and respect (4.27 ± 0.98) (Table 5). These associations suggest that the perceived value of such products may extend beyond their practical utility, serving also as markers of social belonging and identity affirmation within peer communities. Christanti et al. (2021) argued that content shared on Instagram creates a new level of reality within the framework of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, and that these images are now simulacra of reality. Mothers who encounter and consume ads on Instagram may be beginning to construct a new identity within this simulacrum.

In this study, mothers who follow influencers most frequently mentioned BLW-related products, particularly silicone feeding sets (15.9%), steam cookers (12.8%), and high chairs (47.7%), when describing the items they considered essential during the complementary feeding period (Table 7). In the product descriptions

TABLE 11 The relationship between influencer product promotions and opinions about the products purchased in line with these promotions and mothers' age.

Variable	Groups	*n*	M ± SD	Mdn	*p*
Some of the influencer's recommendations influence my purchasing decisions more in the context of trends than necessity	18–29	118	2.76 ± 1.47	3	0.049
	30–39	413	3.14 ± 1.43	3	
	40 and above	35	3.21 ± 1.63	4	
After purchasing these products, I realized that I had many similar products or those functioned the same	18–29	118	2.73 ± 1.38	3	0.007
	30–39	413	3.17 ± 1.32	3	
	40 and above	35	2.79 ± 1.45	2	
Most of the baby feeding products I bought were for problems I could solve with traditional methods	18–29	118	2.54 ± 1.30	2	0.018
	30–39	413	2.91 ± 1.28	3	
	40 and above	35	2.59 ± 1.26	2	
Some of the products I buy are unnecessary, and I only buy them because they are popular	18–29	118	2.83 ± 1.42	3	0.007
	30–39	413	3.29 ± 1.33	3	
	40 and above	35	3.03 ± 1.59	3	

n, number; M, Mean; SD, standard deviation; Mdn, Median.

provided by participants, branded BLW-related products were cited much more frequently by those who follow influencers (Table 7), indicating that brand affiliation carries symbolic capital within digital motherhood culture. The reference to recognizable product names might serve as social signaling, allowing mothers to position themselves within a community that values informed, attentive, and "conscious" parenting. This process mirrors Baudrillard (1968)'s notion of consumption as a language in which brands operate as signifiers of prestige and moral awareness.

Yet, this symbolic satisfaction may be precarious compared to the actual user experience. As reflected in the negative post-purchase evaluations, 80.8% of participants stated that products recommended by influencers failed to meet expectations, and half of them (50.8%) later questioned the necessity of these items. In comparison, 23.8% cited limited functionality (Tables 9, 10). These patterns may reflect a divergence between anticipated symbolic benefits and practical outcomes. Pearce and Rundle (2022) noted that some mothers believe practicing BLW makes them better mothers, but it also puts pressure on them. Mothers may act within social media norms despite knowing it will put them under stress to appear like a good mother. The participant's statements support this view, "Silicone feeding plates and spoons… Those are simply designed products and can be

replaced by a normal plate and spoon. However, for some reason, there is an approach in my social circle. Good parents should buy that brand."

This symbolic role of brands is further supported by the quantitative results, where influencer-following mothers reported that using these products made them feel "accepted and respected" within their social circles (4.27 ± 0.99) (Table 5). This association between brand use and social affirmation may imply that products endorsed by influencers are not merely functional but are interpreted by some mothers as expressions of social alignment and maternal attentiveness. One participant described, "I can say that taking my daughter's food with me in a Stanley thermos made me feel like a more attentive and thoughtful mother." This reflection suggests that brand usage can carry symbolic meaning, allowing ordinary caregiving practices to be imbued with socially valued attributes. In this sense, branding may become a symbolic strategy through which mothers not only communicate esthetic and moral values but also affirm their place within a collective ideal of modern, conscientious motherhood.

The comparative analyses of influencer-following and non-following mothers suggest a divergence between functional and symbolic consumption orientations. Mothers who do not follow influencers tend to prioritize practicality and functionality when selecting products for the complementary feeding period. In contrast, those who follow influencers tend to adopt a more symbolic and brand-driven approach. This distinction is supported by quantitative results showing that influencer-following mothers place greater emphasis on the influence of their social environment ($p = 0.002$) when purchasing products (Table 3). The product lists further reinforce this pattern: non-following participants more frequently mentioned simple and manual feeding tools, whereas influencer-following mothers identified specific, visually distinctive products associated with BLW culture, such as silicone feeding sets and steamers (Tables 7, 8). Despite these symbolic investments, satisfaction levels among influencer-following mothers remained relatively low, suggesting that the appeal of such products might rest primarily on their social visibility rather than their functional performance (Table 9). This disjunction between symbolic promise and practical experience may be interpreted through Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, in which consumption increasingly revolves around symbolic representations rather than practical use (Baudrillard, 1981).

A striking example of this realization comes from a non-follower mother who explicitly rejected the artificial construction of product needs: "Silicone plates, spoons, and steam cookers, none of them are necessary. Traditional methods are sufficient for healthy baby development. All these items are imposed by popular culture and chosen to avoid falling behind, as in 'oh, this is the best one everyone loves.' Instead of a steamer, you can place a plate in a pot and steam the food."

This perspective may be understood in light of Adorno's (2004) concept of false needs, in which consumer desires are shaped by ideological systems rather than intrinsic necessities. As the participant notes, everyday caregiving can be achieved through simpler, traditional means, indicating a rejection of the market-driven narrative that equates modernity with better parenting. This perspective might highlight a shift back to functional,

experience-based reasoning, demonstrating that, over time, some mothers disengage from the illusion of symbolic consumption to regain autonomy over their caregiving choices.

5.2 FoMO and the visibility race in modern motherhood

The findings of this study suggest that influencer culture may contribute to the circulation of idealized representations of motherhood, subtly shaping maternal practices. As Organ (2020) notes, many influencers on Instagram reinforce the ideology of "intensive motherhood" and post-feminist ideals of self-fulfillment, framing maternal perfection as empowerment. Within this framework, the frequent presentation of curated, perfectionist images might function less as "inspiring suggestions" and more as social cues that implicitly signal expectations about good parenting. In this study, 10.6% of participants reported comparing their babies' development and experiences with those of others on social media (Table 4), suggesting that influencer content may foster habitual comparison and performance anxiety.

One participant remarked, "Some influencers share too many products, constantly appear to be preparing for events, always look well-groomed, and post photos that make it seem like they are living a perfect life." This perspective illustrates how the constant exposure to curated perfection reinforces feelings of inadequacy while sustaining a system of symbolic aspiration. Kirkpatrick and Lee (2022) revealed that mothers who frequently compared themselves with others tended to perceive their parenting competence as lower when confronted with the "perfect" family and home images circulating on social media. This aligns with the findings, illustrating how continuous exposure to hyperreal representations of motherhood contributes to self-doubt and emotional fatigue. As one mother noted, "Some influencers share too many products, constantly appear to be preparing for events, always look well-groomed, and post photos that make it seem like they are living a perfect life. This increases my feelings of inadequacy. Initially, this led me to put a lot of pressure on myself. I prefer to follow minimalist accounts and focus on what is essential." Another emphasized the discrepancy between online representations and lived experience: "Many of them make it seem very easy, without showing how difficult infant feeding can be… I have yet to see a baby who eats everything during the complementary feeding period." Such reflections suggest that hyperreal portrayals of motherhood intensify mothers' self-evaluations, producing a continuous cycle of aspiration and self-correction. Within this cycle, the emotional labor of being a "conscious" and "modern" mother is sustained through care practices and the symbolic consumption of reassurance, status, and belonging.

Quantitative findings further suggest that some participants may internalize these idealized motherhood norms. Mothers who agreed with the statement "Using these products makes me feel that I fulfill my motherhood responsibilities more consciously and effectively" (3.70 ± 1.20) (Table 5) could reflect a shift from autonomous caregiving to socially regulated behavior framed as self-improvement. The internalization of such norms may transform motherhood into a public performance governed by digital spectatorship.

The findings suggest that influencer content extends beyond the provision of information and functions as a social mechanism

that triggers mothers' desire to stay relevant and visible within their peer networks. While influencers appear to fill an informational gap related to child nutrition and care, their content may constructs an implicit pressure to "keep up" with prevailing maternal norms. Quantitative data reinforces this pattern: 20.3% of participants reported following influencers to remain informed about topics discussed in their social circles (Table 2), while 8.4% stated they followed them "to stay up-to-date," and 10.6% admitted to comparing their babies' development with others (Table 4). Furthermore, in general, the participants reflect a strong sense of accomplishment by declaring that they stay up-to-date by using recommended products (3.72 ± 1.120) (Table 5). This trend is consistent with previous research. Chee et al. (2023) note that social media offers parents an accessible and relatable community, particularly during the transition from pregnancy to early parenthood, and can therefore play an informative and supportive role. However, the same study also highlights that interactions with influencer content may not always be beneficial; on the contrary, in some cases, they can negatively impact the parenting experience by creating feelings of inadequacy, comparison pressure, and the need to conform to normative expectations. This contrast may support the notion that the motivations for "staying current" and "not falling behind" observed in this study are actually intertwined with both the supportive and suppressive aspects of social media.

The findings suggest that FoMO-related dynamics on social media may contribute to a dual form of psychological tension among mothers: one linked to performance anxiety, shaped by concerns about not being a "good enough" mother, and the other to consumption anxiety, associated with worries about not providing the "right" opportunities or products for their child. This twofold tension reflects how influencer culture simultaneously dictates behavioral ideals and commodifies maternal care. The data underscore the emotional dimension of this process: 10.0% of participants reported "feeling that they cannot be alone," indicating a persistent sense of social comparison and dependency on collective validation, while 2.3% mentioned following influencers for "motivation" (Table 4). These patterns imply that navigating digital motherhood norms may involve ongoing emotional labor. Moreover, mothers' tendency to agree with the statement "Using these products gives me confidence in motherhood decisions" (3.70 ± 1.20) demonstrates how consumer objects are internalized as tools for emotional reassurance, helping mothers temporarily alleviate inadequacy and self-doubt (Table 5).

Participants' responses indicate that consumption behaviors are shaped by a fear of social exclusion and a desire for approval, as evidenced by high mean scores for feeling "accepted and respected in social circles" (4.27 ± 0.99) and "appreciated by others" (4.16 ± 1.03) (Table 5). One participant's statement, "Silicone plates, spoons, steam cookers… all the other pieces are items imposed by popular culture and chosen to avoid falling behind, like 'oh, this is the best one'" illustrates how consumer choices may function as performances of belonging rather than autonomous needs. The intertwining of visibility and anxiety may transform FoMO into a socially reinforced cycle of symbolic consumption, where maintaining one's image as a "modern and up-to-date" mother (3.72 ± 1.20) may become a benchmark of success, as mentioned above, and also a source of emotional exhaustion (Table 5).

5.3 Age-based differences

The findings of this study suggest age-related differences in how mothers interpret influencer-generated content. Mothers aged 18–29 tend less frequently to associate using influencer-recommended products with motivations such as "having more in common with other moms," "following trends," and "showing that they made the best choice to their social circle" (Table 6). In addition, these mothers defined their motivation to follow influencers based on necessity more than keeping up trend compared to the mothers aged 30 and above ($p = 0.049$) (Table 11). In this context, it may indicate that mothers aged 18–29 are less affected by FoMO. The same group reported lower awareness that the purchased products can be substituted with traditional methods ($p = 0.018$), suggesting that this group places greater initial trust in influencer recommendations and may not yet have developed the critical distance that experience affords (Table 11).

By contrast, mothers aged 30–39 are more likely to question the functionality and necessity of the products they purchase based on influencer recommendations. In this group, the rate of noticing functional similarity between the products they purchased as a result of influencer promotions and the products they already owned is significantly high ($p = 0.007$). Furthermore, this group more frequently stated that the baby-feeding products promoted by influencers could, in fact, be replaced with traditional methods ($p = 0.018$). Similarly, the perception that "some products were purchased only because they were popular" was also significantly higher among this cohort ($p = 0.007$) (Table 11). These results may reflect that mothers aged 30–39 tend to purchase influencer-promoted products with a desire to stay current, yet develop a stronger sense of false-need awareness and post-purchase regret over time. It can thus be argued that, for this group, the hyperreal promises embedded in influencer advertising often lead to disappointment and retrospective critique.

Mothers aged 40 and above, on the other hand, tend to adopt a more distant approach to influencer-generated content. Apparently, this group follows the influencers with a stronger motivation of developing a sense of community with other mothers, keeping up the trends, and depicting making the best choice to their social circle, especially compared to the mothers aged 18–29 (Table 6). Moreover, compared to the mothers aged 18–29, they have a stronger tendency to think that their consumption practices depend on trends rather than necessity. They display poorer judgment in expressing negative opinions of purchased products through influencers in solving problems using traditional methods, similar to mothers aged 18–29. They also do not represent a lead in criticizing the influencer-recommended products on other issues compared to the other age groups (Table 11). Accordingly, mothers aged 40 and above who follow influencers appear to be guided by influencers, with a motivation possibly driven by FoMO. This might suggest that this age group perceives influencer content as a means of achieving social visibility and belonging, whereby the symbolic dimensions of consumption outweigh its functional aspects.

While mothers aged 18–29 are immersed in the hyperreal flow of digital content, their familiarity with visual platforms and influencer culture may enable them to approach it with a more skeptical perspective. Although they frequently follow influencers, they tend to view influencer recommendations with some critical distance, seeing them as just one of many sources of information rather than absolute guides. In contrast, mothers aged 30–39 and those aged 40 and above seem to engage with influencer content primarily to align with perceived modern parenting

norms and maintain inclusion in digital maternal communities. This generational difference could make them more vulnerable to FoMO-driven consumption, where influencer-promoted products are not critically evaluated until after use. And this vulnerability seems to be increasing as the generational distance to hyperrealism increases. For mothers aged 30–39, their greater post-purchase awareness of product functionality may reflect delayed understanding rather than initial scrutiny. These findings suggest that motivations for following influencers vary by age groups: for younger mothers, it may be embedded in a broader digital habitus, while for older cohorts, it appears more closely tied to symbolic inclusion and the negotiation of maternal identity within contemporary parenting discourse. But mothers aged 40 and above have similar satisfaction with the Influencer-recommended product with mothers aged 18–29 is another remarkable issue. But the relationship with the influencers of those two distinct generations should be addressed from another perspective.

5.4 Limitations

This study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The research was conducted online, recruiting participants through Instagram and other social media platforms. Consequently, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all mothers in Türkiye, particularly those who are less active on digital platforms.

The data were collected through self-reports, the responses may have been influenced by biases such as social desirability or recall errors. For example, some participants may have presented their motherhood practices or product choices in a more favorable light than they actually experienced.

Although the lower number of participants aged 40+ among mothers with children aged 6–48 months is an expected outcome, it should be recognized that this numerical imbalance across age groups remains a limitation of the study. These methodological limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the results and drawing broader conclusions.

6 Conclusion

This study shows that social media influencers shape mothers' product preferences during the complementary feeding period, and that symbolic values, rather than functionality, have become a key factor in influencing these preferences. The findings support the idea that consumption now aims not only to satisfy physical needs but also to build social identities. This highlights the first major contribution of this study: the symbolic mediation of maternal consumption in the digital era.

In line with Jean Baudrillard's idea of the consumer society, the study showed that BLW products may be purchased by mothers who value them both practically and symbolically. Therefore, these products are used to display a "modern and conscious parenting" identity, as well as for their functional purposes. Promoted by influencers, these products might become tools that enhance mothers' feelings of visibility, approval, and social belonging.

The findings of this study significantly enhance the literature on consumer culture and the discussion of how cultural identity is shaped within the realm of social media effects. Specifically, it offers an example of how a traditional identity category, like motherhood, is transformed through digital sign systems and visibility policies.

The effects of digital consumption culture vary across age groups. While mothers aged 18–29 are more open to influencer content, those aged 30–39 and 40 and above tend to be more critical. This shows that consumption habits are influenced not only by personal preferences but also by cultural backgrounds and generational identities. This constitutes the second key contribution of the study: shedding light on age differences in responses to influencer-driven marketing.

Another key finding of the study is how FoMO affects motherhood practices. Motherhood, as a social identity with high significance, has become a space of intense visibility competition; influencer advice has not only created information gaps but also increased the pursuit of social approval among mothers.

Findings also underscore critical issues of governance and ethics in branded content and media marketing ecosystems. The products promoted by influencers in infant care and nutrition are not just symbols of consumption but also directly affect child health and maternal wellbeing. This raises questions about the responsibilities of influencers, brands, and platforms to ensure their information and content are accurate, transparent, and not misleading. Stronger regulatory frameworks and clearer platform policies are essential to prevent the commercialization of parenting practices from becoming manipulative or harmful forms of consumer pressure. This leads to the third key contribution of the study: highlighting the ethical and sustainability implications of digital marketing in sensitive areas, such as parenting.

Furthermore, the widespread presence of products that quickly lose their usefulness or need highlights the sustainability issues caused by influencer-driven marketing. As the study showed, many items are bought for symbolic reasons and then quickly thrown away, leading to patterns of wasteful consumption. Solving this problem requires a move toward more socially responsible branded content practices, where visibility and sales are balanced with long-term consumer wellbeing and sustainable product life cycles. Such a shift would not only protect vulnerable groups like mothers but also enhance the credibility and future of media marketing ecosystems.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Author contributions

PO: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Validation, Writing – original draft. CK: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. OpenAI's ChatGPT-5 (2025 version, https://chat.openai.com) was utilized to support the writing process by enhancing sentence clarity, restructuring selected sections, and improving the overall fluency of the narrative. All AI-assisted content was carefully reviewed, edited, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final manuscript.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1730534/full#supplementary-material

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