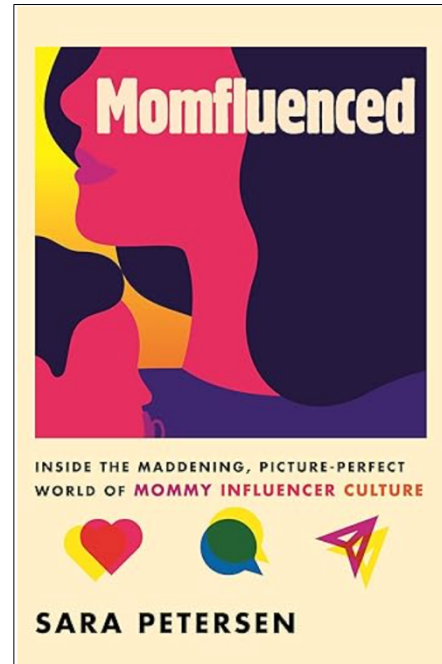


Sara Petersen, **Momfluenced: Inside the Maddening, Picture-Perfect World of Mommy Influencer Culture**, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2023, 309 pp., \$18.95 (paperback).

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In ***Momfluenced: Inside the Maddening, Picture-Perfect World of Mommy Influencer Culture***, Sara Petersen reveals how mothers consume mommy influencer content for reasons such as seeking validation that motherhood is lonely and hard, combating isolation, normalizing the messy “I-don’t-know” scenarios of parenting, and finding solidarity in shared chaos. The book is a timely exploration of how motherhood is shaped, staged, and commodified in the digital age. Aimed at scholars in media studies, communication, feminist theory, and cultural studies, the book also appeals to general readers, especially mothers and those who navigate maternal identity on platforms like Instagram. It offers a rhetorically rich and emotionally resonant critique of an industry where maternal labor becomes a brand, authenticity becomes performance, and vulnerability becomes capital. The book provides an insightful entry into the digital dimensions of gendered labor and identity.



The interdisciplinary approach in *Momfluenced* makes it a valuable resource for academics exploring gendered digital labor, platform capitalism, and the performance of identity online. Simultaneously, its engaging style and relatable subject matter ensure its appeal to nonacademic readers, especially mothers who navigate these digital spaces and recognize the pressures and paradoxes Petersen describes.

The primary objective of *Momfluenced* is to examine the dissonance between the chaotic, often messy reality of motherhood and its highly curated online representations. Petersen seeks to uncover how maternal identities are constructed, consumed, and commodified and how digital communities fulfill and sometimes exploit the human need for belonging. She effectively accomplishes this through a blend of ethnographic research, rhetorical analysis, and reflexive narrative. By analyzing both mommy influencers and their audiences, Petersen demonstrates how motherhood is not merely lived but perpetually co-constructed and performed, offering a compelling critique of the industry’s emotional and economic underpinnings.

Petersen, a White, middle-class woman, writes as both a consumer of mommy influencer content and as a mother herself, offering readers an insider’s gaze into the tensions between authenticity, capitalism, motherhood, and femininity. To explore these tensions, she adopts a method that is experiential rather than strictly theoretical. While she does not construct a rigid theoretical framework, she grounds her

experiential analysis in contemporary research, citing studies like that of Moujaes and Verrier (2021) to illustrate how the social comparison dynamics inherent to Instagram exacerbate maternal anxiety. She acknowledges that in consuming countless curated versions of motherhood, it becomes a profound challenge to discern where her own identity ends and the internalized embodiment of an influencer's persona begins. Drawing on this concept, she theorizes momfluencer consumption as a tripartite coping mechanism: escapism, aspiration, and consumerism. The impetus for the book lies in the increasing scrutiny of influencer culture and the commercialization of everyday life. Written during a time when social media became even more central due to pandemic-related isolation, *Momfluenced* taps into the cultural anxieties and expectations around motherhood, labor, and identity. Petersen acknowledges that digital maternal communities fulfill the basic human need for connection but also critiques how those spaces are shaped by platform capitalism and racialized norms.

Chapters 1–3 establish the economic foundations of momfluencing, tracing how mothers monetize their identities through endorsements, personal brands, and aesthetic labor. Petersen expands the definition of a momfluencer from merely “a mother monetizing her identity” (p. 6) to someone who must present a cohesive, marketable persona—fitness mom, natural mom, minimalist mom, etc., across platforms. Authenticity, she argues, becomes a form of rhetorical ethos, not because it is genuine but because it is emotionally legible. Influencer managers often encourage staged vulnerability, asking clients to cry, disclose miscarriages, or share postpartum struggles to boost relatability.

Chapter 4 explores how the author's mother experienced motherhood in an era before social media. In as much as Petersen admires the current momfluencer culture, she claims that her mother is the one who made her fall in love with the idea of motherhood. Unlike today's momfluencers, Petersen's mother did not perform her maternal identity for a digital audience. She mothered on her own terms, with a quiet authority that Petersen now sees as radical. Her beauty, the author recalls, “was her own,” not curated for others (p. 114). This contrast between past and present motherhood becomes a rhetorical move in itself: Petersen does not argue for a return to some mythical past, but she does question what we have lost in the quest for digital validation. Petersen's mother offers a counternarrative to the algorithmically optimized versions of motherhood that dominate social media.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the aesthetics of motherhood online. Clean countertops, Scandinavian lighting, and peacefully playing toddlers form a visual rhetoric of competence. This aesthetic not only sets aspirational standards but also constrains expressions of real motherhood. For many mothers watching from home, the implication is that if their lives do not look like this, they are failing. Petersen astutely observes that emotional labor becomes a marketing tool and motherhood a continuous performance.

Chapter 7 talks about Whiteness, capitalism, and the ideal good mom concept. Petersen is also careful to contextualize momfluencing within the racialized history of American motherhood. She notes that “the good white mom in her good white home ensures that there is such a thing as a good mom and a good home” (p. 161). This norm is hardly challenged by brands or platforms; as a result, it births a system in which White momfluencers are more likely to be paid, promoted, and platformed. Those who do not fit that mold—Black mothers, queer mothers, disabled mothers—are invisible. American momfluencers must perform within racialized and gendered scripts to maintain their visibility.

Therefore, Petersen reveals how platform capitalism privileges Whiteness and marginalizes others while claiming to be relatable.

The book aligns with feminist critiques of digital labor, like Angela McRobbie's (2009) analysis of postfeminist media culture. Yet, unlike other works such as Brooke Erin Duffy's (2017) *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, which focuses more broadly on creative digital labor, Petersen narrows in on motherhood as both subject and strategy. While much influencer scholarship, including ethnographic and sociological studies, explores impact and practice, *Momfluenced* employs a rhetorical and affective lens, making it a valuable addition to literature on gendered digital economies.

One of the book's key strengths is its intersectional framework. Petersen includes voices of plus-size, queer, and Black mothers, offering a broader view of maternal identity than typically seen in mainstream media. Her reflexive self-critique enriches this intersectionality. She admits, for example, that she had not previously considered the lack of size-inclusive maternity wear until following influencers who raised the issue (p. 212). These moments of humility model an ethic of listening and learning that strengthens her critique.

However, the book is not without limitations. Its exclusive focus on American momfluencers narrows its global relevance. Researchers in the Global South or in multicultural settings may find the analysis less applicable to their contexts. Moreover, while the book critiques the commodification of mothers, it says little about the visibility and rights of children featured in monetized content. Finally, Petersen's personal engagement with momfluencer content, while emotionally compelling, sometimes blurs the line between critique and complicity.

Despite these weaknesses, *Momfluenced* makes a compelling scholarly contribution. Petersen uses rhetorical tools to unpack how maternal identity is disciplined and empowered by digital platforms. Her inquiry invites readers to reflect on how the stories that we consume shape our understanding of motherhood, fulfillment, and femininity. She points to the utopian fantasy that some women have discovered the maternal pot of gold at the end of the Instagram rainbow a fantasy that, while attractive, remains out of reach for most and serves to sustain unrealistic social expectations.

Sara Petersen's *Momfluenced* is more than a cultural snapshot; it is a layered inquiry into how motherhood is shaped, staged, and sold in the digital age. It offers a rhetorically rich portrait of an economy where maternal labor becomes a brand, where authenticity becomes performance, and where vulnerability becomes capital. She notes that Instagram can sometimes offer a utopian motherhood idea that some mothers have discovered the pot of gold at the end of the maternal rainbow. This fantasy sustains the cultural belief that such gold exists, even as it remains perpetually out of reach for most.

*Momfluenced* provides both a vital scholarly framework and a necessary reality check documenting the costs of performative motherhood. Petersen challenges us to think more critically about the stories we consume and the identities we emulate. She also highlights how momfluencers frame motherhood as life's ultimate purpose (p. 76), prompting readers to question: What happens when society equates parenting with fulfillment? How does this impact women without children or diverse family

structures, and what are the mental health consequences? These questions invite further research into the momfluencer industry and its broader societal implications.

### References

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