

Social Media as a Coping Resource: A Qualitative Study of Mothers Navigating Parenting Stress with Influencer Support

Aneela Saeed^{1*}, Abida Ashraf^{2*}

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the influence of symbolic role modeling through social media on mothers' perceived self-efficacy and coping strategies during their parenting journey. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy was adopted as the theoretical framework, with symbolic role modeling conceptualized as a vicarious source contributing to the development of self-efficacy beliefs. Using qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with Pakistani mothers of children of age group one year to ten years who actively engage with social media platforms. The analysis revealed that mothers encounter persistent physical and emotional strain, exacerbated by the demands of multitasking, societal scrutiny, lack of support, and household-related stressors. Amid these challenges, social media role models emerged as a significant source of informal support, guidance, and emotional validation. The data showed that these symbolic figures fulfill three major functions: (1) as problem solvers—offering strategies for conflict resolution, therapeutic engagement, managing perfectionism in parenting, and validating maternal experiences; (2) as educators—promoting emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and a sense of community belonging; and (3) as attention diverters—providing entertainment and mental respite to alleviate stress. Mothers reported that observing and engaging with these role models not only helped them cope with everyday parenting stressors but also enhanced their belief in their own parenting capabilities. These findings extend Bandura's theory by emphasizing the psychosocial and emotional functions of symbolic role modeling in the digital age and highlight the evolving influence of social media in shaping contemporary motherhood practices.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Coping strategies, Vicarious learning, Pakistani mothers, Emotional Support

¹Aneela Saeed, (Ph.D.), Scholar, School of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. **Corresponding Author:** aneelasaeed678@gmail.com

²Abida Ashraf, (Ph.D.), Professor, School of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, the trend of motherhood practices is shifting from traditional and local communities to the easily accessible communities especially on social media. Online platforms have become prominent places where parenting behaviors, emotional expressions, and coping mechanisms are displayed, consumed, and often emulated (Abidin, 2016; Tiidenberg, 2017). Mothers, especially those managing the demands of early childhood parenting, frequently turn to these digital figures—symbolic role models—for guidance, inspiration, and emotional reassurance (Lopez, 2021). This shift reflects a broader transformation in how maternal support is accessed and experienced. Traditional sources of social and emotional support may be limited due to geographic, cultural, or structural barriers, pushing mothers to seek alternative forms of validation and learning through online engagement (Morris, 2014).

Social media influencers have become important sources of emotional and practical support for mothers navigating the physical and emotional challenges of parenting. Across diverse contexts, these influencers contribute to maternal coping by modeling self-care, validating parenting struggles, and fostering online communities. Influencers who portray authentic and imperfect parenting help reduce guilt and normalize emotional burnout (Lupton, 2021; Hansen, 2020). In influencers support mothers are managing postpartum recovery and societal expectations by enhancing maternal self-efficacy through relatable content (Kim, 2018; Li & Wang, 2020). In the South Asian subcontinent, culturally resonant influencers help mothers manage patriarchal family structures, domestic responsibilities, and emotional strain, often promoting resilience and self-compassion (Deshmukh, 2021; Fatima, 2023). These global findings align with Bandura's social cognitive theory, emphasizing the power of symbolic role modeling in shaping maternal self-perception, coping behaviors, and confidence in parenting roles. This study explores on supportive role of social media influencers in shaping the coping strategies mothers adopt to manage 'The Physical and Emotional parenting challenges' and 'Every day Parenting Stressors' in their parenting journey. Research Questions designed to achieve these objectives are:

RQ1: Whether social media influencers influence mothers' coping strategies for managing physical and emotional challenges in parenting?

RQ2: How does exposure to social media influencers influence mothers in managing everyday parenting stressors encountered during parenting role?

2. Literature Review

Influencers on the social media are emerging as symbolic figures who are supportive for mothers in shaping their maternal identity, emotional regulation and behavior management. Presence of these influencers has made digital spaces for mothers as a platform to seek advice, affirmations and emotional connections. The literature has shown several studies emphasizing the supportive role of influencers in enhancing maternal coping strategies. Craig and Harper (2023) found that Mothers perceives influencers as Peer like figures who depict their emotional honesty in a way that normalize stress and lessen feelings of inadequacy. Similarly, Germic, Eckert, and Vultee (2021) revealed an enhancement is Perceived self-efficacy of mothers after exposure to Mommy bloggers on Instagram who modeled practical challenges and coping techniques like on daily routine, self-care practices and emotional expression. These findings highlight the role of influencers as information resource as well as symbolic role model for emotional and behavioral coping. During the upward social comparison with the idealized portrayals, mothers are also found lowering their confidence while on the other hand after exposure to influencers displaying authentic vulnerabilities, these mothers responded supportive in encouragement of emotional acceptance and self-compassion (Kim, 2018). This duality was also reflected in Ouvrein's (2024) experimental study, where exposure to unrealistic physical portrayal lowers mothers' confidence postpartum and improve in their well-being and resilience when they are exposed to positive physical portrayals and relatable content., Li and Wang (2020) study contributed the literature in cultural perspective, they examined Chinese mothers and explored that supportive influencers are providing culturally contextualized emotional support which is helpful for mothers navigate postpartum adjustments, especially in presence of rigid societal pressure. In the context of modern parenting, mothers who follow digital influencers may adopt similar coping mechanisms, emotional regulation strategies, and parenting techniques, thereby strengthening their perceived self-efficacy. This is particularly relevant in environments where traditional support systems are eroded by isolation, migration, or socio-cultural constraints, prompting mothers to turn to online communities for support and identity reinforcement (Madge, 2006). Moreover, research has shown that engagement with online maternal communities can serve both practical and psychological functions, including stress reduction, emotional validation, and peer learning (Bartholomew, 2012).

Collectively, these studies show that exposure to supportive, emotionally honest, and culturally resonant parenting influencers contributes to the development of mothers' emotional resilience, self-perception, and coping behavior. Influencers act as both empathic mirrors and behavioral models, especially when they offer content that is relatable, non-judgmental, and informative. While content that promotes perfectionism may heighten self-doubt, authentic and community-oriented influencers appear to foster healthier coping mechanisms among mothers managing physical and emotional parenting challenges

3. Theoretical Framework:

This study is grounded in Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, which posits that individuals' beliefs in their ability to perform specific tasks or handle challenges play a central role in behavior regulation, motivation, and psychological well-being. Self-efficacy is not determined solely by actual ability but by one's confidence in that ability, especially when facing pressure, adversity, or uncertainty.

Bandura identified four primary sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological/emotional states. Among these, **vicarious experiences**—also known as vicarious learning—are particularly relevant to this study. Vicarious learning occurs when individuals enhance their own sense of competence by observing others successfully perform tasks, especially when the observed individuals are perceived as relatable or similar to the observer (Bandura, 1986)

In the context of modern motherhood, social media influencers act as symbolic role models whose parenting behaviors, emotional expressions, and coping mechanisms are continuously on display through digital platforms. Mothers who follow these influencers are often exposed to practical routines, emotional regulation strategies, and self-care practices that they may not otherwise encounter in traditional support structures. By observing these influencers navigate parenting stress, fatigue, or emotional overwhelm, mothers may internalize similar strategies, resulting in enhanced confidence in their own ability to cope (Coyne, 2020). This vicarious process strengthens their parenting self-efficacy, particularly when the influencers are perceived as authentic, culturally relevant, or experientially relatable (Marwick, 2015).

Thus, this study applies Bandura's theory to explore **how** vicarious exposure to supportive parenting influencers facilitates maternal coping in the face of everyday physical and emotional parenting challenges. It extends the traditional understanding of vicarious learning by investigating how digitally mediated models, rather than in-person ones, contribute to self-regulatory capacity and emotional resilience in caregiving roles.

4. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore how social media influencers influence mothers' coping strategies and stress management during parenting. A qualitative approach was chosen to allow for rich, nuanced insights into mothers' lived experiences, beliefs, and emotional responses, which are best captured through open-ended narratives rather than standardized measurements (Creswell, 2018). The study followed an interpretive paradigm, aiming to understand how

mothers construct meaning around their engagement with influencers in the context of parenting challenges.

A total of 15 mothers participated in the study. All participants were between the ages of 25 and 45 and were parenting at least one child between 1 and 10 years old. The participants were recruited through purposive sampling—a strategy commonly used in qualitative research to select participants who possess specific knowledge or experience relevant to the research focus (Palinkas, 2015). The inclusion criteria required participants to be active users of social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, YouTube) and to regularly follow one or more parenting influencers.

Maximum variation was sought in terms of participants' age, number of children, education level, and working status, to capture a range of perspectives. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached—that is, no new significant themes were emerging from the data (Guest, 2006)

5. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via video call, depending on participant preference and availability. An interview guide was developed based on the research questions and existing literature, with questions focusing on mothers' parenting stressors, emotional and physical challenges, social media usage, and the perceived influence of parenting influencers on their coping practices.

Interviews were conducted in Urdu or English, depending on participants' comfort. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. In the case of Urdu interviews, transcripts were translated to English for analysis while preserving meaning and context.

6. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and producing the final report. An inductive approach was used, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed from pre-existing frameworks. Coding was done manually, and recurring codes were grouped and taken once during the analysis.

In the course of the interviews, the mother highlighted many distinct codes which are challenging for them and for which they always seek Social Media Influencers for any coping strategy. Against the physical challenges they mentioned *Physical Sufferings, Exhaustion, Disrupted Sleep and lack of sleep, Post Work Fatigue* as the most prominent and eminent factors. Similarly against the theme ‘emotional challenges’, the researcher received *Stress, emotional suffering, depression, inner struggle, worrying, religious duties nonperformance* as the main factors for which they seek help from media influencers and against the third theme of ‘every day parenting role strain’, the mothers mentioned *Multitasking, Child's demand for energy, Addressing kids diverse needs, Managing meal time, Balancing work and family, Multiple responsibilities, Resist Children Request, Role integration, Navigating dual roles, Setting Family Rules, Managing Kids Emotions, Dealing with Childhood Trauma, Managing Sleep Schedule, Personal space for children, Mother guilt* . The frequency table against each theme is mentioned in the table:

Table 1: Consolidated Frequency Table

| Main Theme | Codes/Subthemes | Frequency (%) |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Physical Strain | Physical Sufferings | 100% |
| | Disrupted Sleep | 80% |
| | Lack of Sleep | 80% |
| | Exhaustion | 53.3% |
| | Post Work Fatigue | 53.3% |
| Emotional Strain | Emotional Suffering | 100% |
| | Stress | 80% |
| | Depression | 80% |
| | Worrying | 80% |
| | Inner Struggle | 53.3% |
| | Religious Duties Nonperformance | 26.7% |
| Parental Role Strain | Managing Meal Time | 100% |
| | Multiple Responsibilities | 100% |
| | Addressing Kids' Diverse Needs | 80% |
| | Managing Kids' Emotions | 80% |
| | Managing Sleep Schedule | 80% |
| | Multitasking | 66.7% |
| | Dealing with Childhood Trauma | 66.7% |
| | Child's Demand for Energy | 53.3% |
| | Balancing Work and Family | 53.3% |
| | Navigating Dual Roles | 53.3% |
| | Role Integration | 40% |
| | Setting Family Rules | 40% |
| | Resist Children's Requests | 33.3% |
| | Personal Space for Children | 33.3% |
| Mother Guilt | 26.7% | |

Maternal Strain Themes and Code Frequencies (N = 15)

The data analysis showed that all the mothers experienced physical and emotional strain, along with challenges arising from multiple responsibilities in their motherhood journey. To manage these difficulties, they turned to social media role models for coping strategies. Based on the mothers' reports, the researchers identified several codes that enabled them to develop a flow chart illustrating various coping strategies and their subcategories, providing a clearer understanding of the findings.

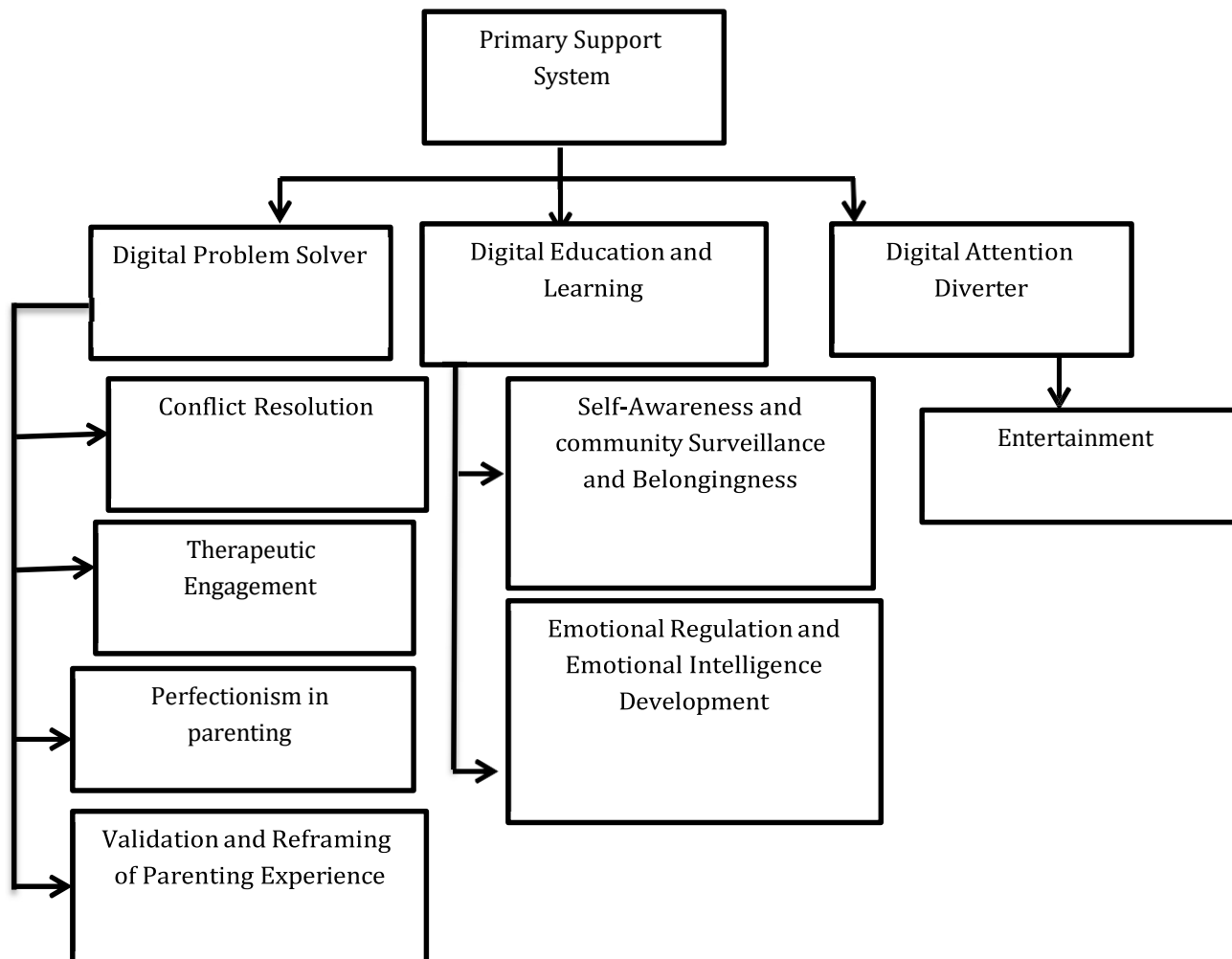


Figure 1: Emerging codes social media Influencers in coping strategies

The analysis of the data revealed that social media role models serve as a primary support system for mothers, fulfilling multiple essential functions in their motherhood journey. These role models act as *problem solvers*, *sources of education and learning*, and *attention diverters*, each contributing uniquely to maternal coping and well-being. As problem solvers, social media role models assist mothers with conflict resolution, provide therapeutic engagements, help manage perfectionism in parenting, and offer validation and reframing of parenting experiences. In their educational role, these influencers promote self-awareness, foster community surveillance and

a sense of belonging, and support the development of emotional regulation and emotional intelligence. Additionally, as attention diverters, social media role models provide mothers with entertainment, serving as a vital outlet for relaxation and mental respite. Collectively, these functions highlight the multifaceted ways social media role models contribute to enhancing mothers' perceived self-efficacy and psychological well-being by addressing practical, emotional, and cognitive needs.

7. Discussion:

In light of the findings, it is evident that social media role models significantly influence mothers' coping strategies for managing the physical and emotional challenges inherent in parenting (RQ1). By functioning as problem solvers, educators, and sources of emotional diversion, these influencers provide mothers with accessible tools and frameworks for navigating parenting stressors. This aligns with Bandura's social cognitive theory, which highlights the importance of observational learning and vicarious experiences in shaping individuals' coping behaviors and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Specifically, social media influencers help mothers reframe parenting challenges, validate their experiences, and offer therapeutic engagement, which collectively supports emotional regulation and reduces feelings of isolation (Coyne, 2020; Phua, 2021; Madge, 2006). Regarding RQ2, the exposure to social media influencers appears to equip mothers with practical conflict resolution skills and promotes self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and community belonging—factors that are crucial for managing everyday parenting stressors (Gadson, 2021) and these influencers are source of emotional processing and reframing of parenting challenges (Baker, 2018). Furthermore, the entertainment value provided by these influencers serves as a vital mental break, contributing to overall psychological well-being (Nesi, 2015).

These findings underscore the multidimensional role social media plays in buffering parenting stress and enhancing maternal self-efficacy in contemporary contexts. Along with traditional support, family or institutional, this study calls for recognition of digital communities as a mandatory support mechanism for mothers. This is helpful for companies and influencers in designing or promoting content that boosts maternal self-efficacy. Professionals can use vicarious learning techniques in the traditional methods to ensure enhanced mother psychological well-being.

Future research should build on the findings of this study by exploring symbolic role modeling across diverse cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic contexts to understand how varying social norms shape mothers' self-efficacy in the digital age. Comparative studies between urban and rural settings, or across different countries, could provide richer cross-cultural insights. Longitudinal research is also recommended to examine how sustained exposure to symbolic role models on social media influences maternal self-efficacy across different parenting stages.

8. Ethical Considerations

Participants were provided with a **consent form** outlining the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, confidentiality assurances, and data use. All data were anonymized using participant codes, and identifiers were removed from transcripts to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Given the sensitive nature of topics such as parental stress, social pressure, and psychological coping, efforts were made to create a safe, empathetic space during interviews. The researcher maintained reflexivity throughout, acknowledging her positionality and potential influence on data interpretation.

9. References

- Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, 161(1), 86–100.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W H Freeman/Times Books/ Henry Holt & Co.
- Bartholomew, M. K.-S. (2012). New parents' Facebook use at the transition to parenthood. . *Family Relations*, 61(3), 455–469.
- Braun, V. &. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Coyne, S. M. (2020). Does time spent using social media impact mental health? An eight year longitudinal study. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 104.
- Coyne, S. M. (2020). Does time spent using social media impact mental health?: An eight-year longitudinal study. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 104.
- Craig, E. &. (2023). Social media influencers' impact during pregnancy and parenting: A qualitative descriptive study. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 46, 725–739.

- Creswell, J. W. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches .
- Deshmukh, R. &. (2021). Digital motherhood and emotional labor in Indian parenting blogs and communities. *Media Watch*, 12(2), 336–349.
- Fatima, A. &. (2023). Symbolic role modeling and digital motherhood: The impact of social media influencers on parenting confidence in Pakistani mothers. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 5(1), 134–150.
- Gadson, J. e. (2021). Social Support and Maternal Mental Health: The Role of Online Communities. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 25(7), 976–984.
- Germic, E. R. (2021). The impact of Instagram mommy blogger content on the perceived self-efficacy of mothers. *Social Media + Society*, 7(4), 1–14.
- Guest, G. B. (2006). How many interviews are enough? *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82.
- Hansen, E. S. (2020). Maternal experiences of social media support and parenting stress: A qualitative analysis. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 61(4), 497–506.
- Kim, E. (2018). Social media use and social comparison effects on mothers' parenting self-efficacy in South Korea. *Journal of Children and Media*, 12(4), 455–469.
- Li, X. &. (2020). Role of social media influencers in maternal self-efficacy and postpartum adjustment: A Chinese perspective. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, 14(3), 212–226.
- Lopez, K. A. (2021). Digital mothering: Exploring the role of Instagram in the identity construction of first-time mothers. *Journal of Family Studies*.
- Lupton, D. P. (2021). Parenting and digital media in the time of COVID-19: A scoping review. *Social Media + Society*, 7(4), 1-10.
- Madge, C. &. (2006). Parenting gone wired: Empowerment of new mothers on the Internet? . *Social & Cultural Geography*, 7(2), 199–220.
- Marwick, A. E. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. *Public Culture*, 27(1), 137–160.
- Morris, M. R. (2014). Social networking site use by mothers of young children. *In Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, (pp. 527–536).
- Nesi, J. &. (2015). Using Social Media for Social Comparison and Feedback-Seeking: Gender and Popularity Moderate Associations with Depressive Symptoms. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 43(8), 1427–1438.
- Ouvrein, K. (2024). Impact of body-focused social media on parenting confidence among postpartum moms as tested using an experimental design. *Discover Psychology*, 4, 261.
- Palinkas, L. A. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42, 533-544.

Phua, J. &. (2021). Psychological Empowerment through Social Media Influencers: Role Modeling and Emotional Support for Young Mothers. *Journal of Family Issues*, 42(2), 345-366.

Tiidenberg, K. &. (2017). Learn it, buy it, work it: Intensive mothering and postfeminist entrepreneurialism in Instagram influencer culture. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(6), 958-976.