

Parenting and production of anxiety on social media: Analysis of parenting on Instagram @parentalk.id

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Abstract

This article discusses the phenomena parenting of the anxiety production constructed by @parentalk.id as a result of interacting with parenting social media accounts. In the digital era, social media has become a primary source of information for many parents seeking guidance and support in raising their children. However, the content often emphasizes ideal standards of parenting that can trigger feelings of anxiety among parents. This study uses a qualitative approach with critical multimodal discourse analysis of the Instagram social media account @parentalk.id. The research findings show that the Instagram account @parentalk.id generates anxiety among parents through its content, which portrays ideal parenting standards. The account acts as a “regime” that limits parents’ freedom, guiding them towards the account’s constructed ideas of ideal parenting. The account also shapes the parenting narrative by disciplining the parents themselves. Uncertainty in modernity is also used as a tool to produce anxiety in parenting. Additionally, the study found that child health is a key content theme that can trigger anxiety among parents.

Keywords: parenting, anxiety production, social media

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has significantly changed how society accesses and produces information. Information has now become highly valuable, important, and even marketable. Social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp facilitate the massive dissemination of content, including parenting-related content. One of the most popular platforms for delivering such information is Instagram. Instagram serves not only as a means of communication but also as a platform for producing content and information that can be monetized (Webster, 2006). As the number of followers increases, Instagram accounts have the potential to generate income through endorsements, advertisements, and other commercial collaborations (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012). The popularity of these accounts is supported by the “like” and “follow” mechanisms, which motivate users to stay connected (Dumas et al., 2017). Instagram’s algorithm encourages this interaction, where

users feel compelled to seek validation through the number of “likes” their posts receive (Soto-Vásquez, 2021). Moreover, Instagram offers various innovative features such as Instastory, Instagram live, IGTV, reels, business guides, and clickable links that connect to other platforms. One of Instagram’s advantages over other platforms is its ability to display visually engaging content in the form of images, photos, text, and videos, making information more effective and easier to consume.

One of the Instagram accounts focusing on parenting is @parentalk.id. With a following of 1.2 million as of 2024, this account has become one of the most popular parenting accounts in Indonesia. It provides content related to child-rearing, marital relationships, pregnancy tips, and other aspects of family life. The account is managed by several admins who use unique nicknames like Bumin, Mammin, and Pakmin, and they alternate in presenting content. Since its inception in November 2017, @parentalk.id has consistently offered parenting content backed by scientific sources, making it credible in the eyes of its followers. In addition to Instagram, @parentalk.id also has a presence on YouTube, podcasts, TikTok, and Telegram, and offers scientific articles related to parenting. Although it is managed professionally and creatively, @parentalk.id also creates anxiety among parents through its content. Anxiety here refers to a state of insecurity that arises within an individual (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). This anxiety emerges because the account often presents ideal parenting standards that are difficult to achieve. Followers are led to agree with the views presented in each post, as evidenced by the high number of “likes” and comments on every piece of content.

The anxiety produced by @parentalk.id can be observed in various posts, such as parenting tips, ideas, and specific statements that shape opinions about the ideal way to raise children. In addition to parenting content, the account also has a capitalization motive, evident from its commercial collaborations with product brands. These contents not only generate anxiety among parents but also create economic opportunities for the account. This aligns with the view that social media prioritizes not only content but also how that content can be monetized (Soto-Vásquez, 2021). The interaction between followers and @parentalk.id is related to the self-identity project, which, according to Anthony Giddens, is part of self-reflection. Being a parent, in this context, is part of a self-identity project that, in the era of late modernity, emphasizes reflexivity, which refers to how individuals reflect on themselves to create a narrative of their identity (Giddens, 1991).

Anthony Giddens also notes that modern times have made “being secure” a project (Giddens, 1991). In the context of being a parent, @parentalk.id offers various ways to achieve a state of security. When individuals do not feel secure, they experience insecurity or anxiety, prompting @parentalk.id to continuously produce anxiety to encourage people to consume its content. The account employs various strategies to increase engagement with its viewers and followers, one of which is by increasing the intensity of content production. The anxiety generated by @parentalk.id may drive parents to seek answers to their parenting problems in the modern era. The account provides a “coping mechanism” in the form of tips, guidance, and advice to help parents feel more confident in their roles. In this way, @parentalk.id acts like a therapist for parents experiencing anxiety. However, according to Giddens, such therapy is not merely a solution to address new anxiety but part of the ongoing self-reflexivity project.

Being a parent in the modern era is no longer autonomous; rather, it is heavily influenced by external systems like social media accounts. @parentalk.id contributes to shape the narrative of the “ideal parent” that its followers must adhere to. Consequently, the account produces anxiety as part of the “risk society,” a concept introduced by Ulrich Beck (Lupton, 2002). Beck argues that modern society is moving toward a risk society, where risks result from technological advancements and modernization itself (Beck et al., 1994). Parents who follow @parentalk.id belong to this risk society, where they are continuously exposed to parenting information that may not always align with their background and circumstances. As they continue to follow @parentalk.id’s content, parents seek answers to their anxieties, yet they also become trapped in the risks of modernization created by the account. @parentalk.id offers solutions that appear to help parents, but at the same time, it creates new risks for them. These risks arise from the ideal standards that are difficult to achieve and the narrative formed by the account about being the perfect parent. Rather than alleviating anxiety, the account amplifies it by continually offering solutions that direct followers toward the standards set by @parentalk.id.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modernity, Risk Society, and Anxiety

Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, two sociocultural theorists, argue that modernity brings its own risks, with late modern society evolving into a “risk society” (Lupton, 2002). This risk society is closely tied to advancing technology, where the media plays a crucial role. Giddens (1999) explains that a risk society lives on the edge of high technology, creating many uncertain future possibilities, driven by the influence of science and technology, as well as shifts from nature and tradition. Modernization has transformed industrial society into a risk society, where the risks arising from modernity are referred to as “reflexive modernization” by Beck and Giddens. According to Deborah Lupton (2002), this shift increases various new risks, such as unemployment, instability in intimate relationships, and heightened anxiety. While in pre-modern society risks were seen as acts of nature or God, modernity has given humans the ability to understand and control risks.

Modern society has become increasingly aware of risks and, consequently, more anxious. Giddens introduces the concept of “ontological security,” which refers to an individual’s confidence in the continuity of self-identity and the stability of social and material environments (Giddens, 1990). This security is a balance between trust and acceptable risks, although modernity also introduces new risks that were previously unknown. Giddens (1991) describes modernity as a “risk culture”, where human self-identity is influenced by experiences mediated by the media and modern institutions.

The media plays a central role in shaping self-identity and social relationships in modern society. Giddens argues that media has become an autonomous system that significantly impacts human identity. In the era of late modernity, reflexivity dominates, as individuals continually seek security (being secured) as a personal project. Anxiety is produced by abstract systems external to individuals, including through the media, which offer narratives of threats or insecurity. Giddens distinguishes between anxiety and fear, with fear having an object and being a response to a specific threat, while anxiety lacks a specific object (Giddens, 1991). In modern society, anxiety is related to feelings of helplessness or a loss of meaning in life, which has become a fundamental psychological issue. Modernity generates new anxieties that influence human lifestyles.

The anxiety emerging in the modern era has become a commodity that can be produced and consumed through the media. The media plays a role in constructing narratives of anxiety about social life, healthy lifestyles, and other social ideals. In the context of this study, parenting knowledge becomes one of the commodities of anxiety produced by the media. Narratives about how to be the ideal parent in the modern era have become a form of anxiety that can be capitalized upon. Giddens also points out that modernity has a capitalist dimension, where anxiety becomes one of the commodities traded in this capitalist system (Cassell, 1993). This study explores how parenting knowledge becomes a commodity of anxiety produced and consumed by individuals through the media.

Parenting as a Self-Trajectory

Anthony Giddens presents the concept of self (the self) and self-identity in relation to parents as individuals who continually shape and understand themselves. According to Giddens, self-identity is not only about the essence of oneself but also how individuals perceive and assess themselves. Parents, as individuals, will continually engage in self-reflection, striving to become the ideal or good parent in raising their children. In the process of self-formation, Giddens emphasizes that the self cannot exist independently but is influenced by external factors. Although individuals actively shape themselves, influences from the environment and external agencies also play a crucial role in this process. Parents actively question themselves about whether they are being good and effective parents in raising their children. This is part of an ongoing process of self-reflection.

Giddens describes self-reflection as an active project, where individuals continually assess and shape their self-identity. Self-identity is a process that never ends, always evolving and changing over time. Giddens also links self-reflection to the concept of “the narrative of the self,” where a person’s narrative of themselves continuously

changes based on past experiences, the present, and future aspirations. In the context of parenting, parents will continually reflect on themselves through their life trajectory, reshaping their narrative according to the phases of life they go through.

In the modern era, the media, particularly social media, plays a significant role in shaping self-narratives, including the role of being a parent. Before the advent of new media, parents might have relied on guidance from family or ancestors in raising children. However, today, new media like Instagram provides a wealth of information and content about parenting that can influence parents' understanding of their role. For instance, after following an Instagram account like @parentalk.id, parents may begin to follow the tips and guidelines presented, shaping and adjusting their self-narrative according to the content they consume.

Giddens also introduces the concept of self-therapy, where individuals autonomously evaluate and assess themselves, including in the role of parenting. Parents engage in self-therapy by questioning whether they are doing the right things in raising their children. Although self-therapy can be done independently, in the modern era, there are many external regimes, such as social media, books, and tutorials, that act as external therapists. Parenting accounts like @parentalk.id can serve as "therapists" for parents, providing content that helps them in the process of self-reflection. Although parents may appear to be freely shaping themselves, they are, in fact, influenced by external regimes that guide and dictate this process. Giddens emphasizes that in this modern era, commodity regimes are very powerful, and external influences, like social media, significantly shape parents' self-identity.

Parenting in the Era of New Media

In the modern era and with the rise of new media, parenting has become part of the modern lifestyle and an essential need. Parenting is not only about knowledge in raising children but also a commodity produced and consumed in the realm of social media, especially Instagram. Social media has become the primary source of parenting information, with many dedicated accounts offering content on how to be the ideal parent and effectively raise children. In the past, child-rearing practices were largely based on traditions passed down through generations. However, nowadays, parents face a wide range of values and demands to ensure the well-being and happiness of their children. As a result, many parents seek the best ways to raise their children through the information available on social media, including Instagram, which offers visually innovative parenting content.

One Instagram account that is highly focused on parenting is @parentalk.id, which has over 1.2 million followers. The account provides various content on child-rearing, marital relationships, family finances, and family health. This account stands out for its professionalism, involving experts in the field of parenting through collaborations and live Instagram broadcasts. In its Instagram bio, @parentalk.id previously included the slogan "The truth about parenting," branding itself as a trustworthy source of parenting content. Parenting content on social media has now become a necessity that is widely consumed by the public. @parentalk.id, with its large following, consistently produces appealing parenting content, complete with scientific references. This approach is taken to increase trust and engagement from its followers. Instagram mechanisms, such as likes, comments, and shares, also help this account strengthen its position as a recognized and trusted source of parenting content.

In the modern era, parenting has evolved into a commodity consumed widely. Being an ideal parent is now seen as essential, and parents are encouraged to follow certain standards set by parenting accounts. However, there remains the belief that the concept of the ideal parent is a myth. Christine M. Beckman and Melissa Mazmanian, through their book *Dreams of the Overworked: Living, Working, and Parenting in the Digital Age* (Beckman et al., 2020), explain that the myth of the perfect parent is about parents dedicating their entire lives to their children, prioritizing their children's needs over their own, and always putting family first. This myth demands that parents engage in quality time with the family, provide enriching activities for their children, monitor their behavior, limit screen time, and ensure they stay on top of homework. While this idealization can inspire aspirations, for many parents, these standards are not always realistic and can add extra pressure to modern life.

METHODS

This study aims to uncover how the Instagram account @parentalk.id produces anxiety. This is a qualitative descriptive study using the critical multimodal discourse analysis method, which analyzes posts in the form of images, captions, and short videos (reels) on the Instagram account @parentalk.id. The corpus of the study consists of selected parenting content posted on the @parentalk.id account. The analyzed posts include photos or short videos (reels) containing words or phrases that may trigger anxiety, particularly related to parenting. The research corpus was selected from posts between 2019 and 2024, focusing on content that contains elements of anxiety in the context of parenting.

Data collection was conducted by gathering primary data from @parentalk.id's posts, including images, text, and short videos. The analysis focused on two main elements: linguistic elements (text) and visual elements (images or short videos). Additional supporting data were collected through a literature review, examining relevant literature such as journal articles, books, and other writings that support this research. Data analysis used the multimodal discourse approach by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, focusing on how meaning is constructed through various modes (visual and textual) in specific social contexts. This approach is rooted in social semiotics, which examines how semiotic resources are produced, reproduced, and transformed according to specific social situations and contexts. The study analyzes three metafunctions based on Michael Halliday's theory: the ideational metafunction, which creates representations; the interpersonal metafunction, which creates interaction between the writer and the reader; and the textual metafunction, which builds coherent relationships between various elements of representation and interaction to produce communicative texts. This research seeks to provide insights into how the @parentalk.id account uses anxiety narratives to attract the attention of its followers and shape perceptions of becoming an ideal parent.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Parenting Design Through Parental Discipline

The Instagram account @parentalk.id plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative of child-rearing, particularly for millennial parents who are active on social media. This account frequently addresses its followers in its posts as "parents," indicating that its content targets young parents seeking child-rearing information through digital platforms. According to a study by Setyastuti et al. (2019), around 82.8% of millennial parents use Instagram as a source of parenting information, making accounts like @parentalk.id popular and influential within this community. In Indonesia, parenting is legally regulated by Government Regulation No. 44 of 2017, which emphasizes that child-rearing should meet children's emotional, safety, and welfare needs in a sustainable manner. @parentalk.id aligns itself with this role by guiding what is considered ideal parenting. Its content is designed to help parents fulfill their parenting obligations, focusing on creating the perfect parent. This is reflected in the assertive language used, such as "the right way" and "mistakes in parenting," which are often found in its posts.

Hoghugh (2004) mentions that parenting is not just about meeting a child's basic needs, but is also part of a public concern regulated by the state. In this context, @parentalk.id acts as a mediator, facilitating parents by providing information about "proper" child-rearing based on established guidelines. The posts typically consist of images or videos with slides containing clear and firm verbal text. These texts reinforce rules about parenting and are often accompanied by visuals that demonstrate how improper parenting can negatively impact children. For example, one post shows a mother scolding her child while pointing her finger at the child, which is presented as an example of poor parenting, implying that parents who act this way are failing.



Image 1. The post about incorrect ways to discipline children in account @parentalk.id.

@parentalk.id instills anxiety in parents by distinguishing between right and wrong parenting practices. In certain posts, @parentalk.id uses anxiety-inducing language, such as the word “wrong” accompanied by an exclamation mark, to emphasize the negative impact of less-than-ideal parenting methods. These messages subtly pressure parents to follow the provided guidelines if they wish to be considered good parents. For example, in a post captioned “The Wrong Way to Discipline a Child!”, the account explicitly tells parents that they must avoid the methods deemed incorrect by the account and offers alternatives for proper parenting. By using checkmarks and crosses, the account reinforces the notion that right and wrong parenting methods are clear, and parents following the account must adapt to its standards.

Anthony Giddens argues that modernity brings significant changes to individual identity, including child-rearing. In this context, @parentalk.id can be understood as a “regime” that governs parental behavior. As a regime, @parentalk.id provides binding directives for parents to adhere to certain standards in child-rearing. This regime lays out disciplinary steps for parents, including what is permissible and not in parenting. The rules regarding parenting provided by the @parentalk.id account become necessary and are directed for parents to follow if they wish to be considered perfect parents. In this context, being a perfect parent is non-negotiable according to @parentalk.id. Therefore, according to @parentalk.id, if parents want to be perfect, they must adhere to the parenting methods constructed by the regime of @parentalk.id. Indirectly, parents are also being disciplined by the regime of @parentalk.id if they wish to eliminate the anxiety surrounding parenting. Here, @parentalk.id is referred to as a regime.

Generally, regimes have actors and various elements involved in initiating, shaping, and regulating a community or group. A regime’s goal is to regulate a system within society (Holtz et al., 2008). A regime is associated with societal functions and involves many people. The @parentalk.id account is referred to as a regime, simultaneously acting as an entity that regulates parents. A regime is also a method of self-discipline. Although a regime is not solely formed by everyday life practices, personal habits partly regulated by social order are also shaped by individual tendencies and personalities (Giddens, 1991). A regime operates by providing carefully structured steps that parents are expected to follow. The @parentalk.id regime offers methods of disciplining children while also disciplining parents themselves. Below is a post from the @parentalk.id account guiding parents who are confused about how to handle their child.

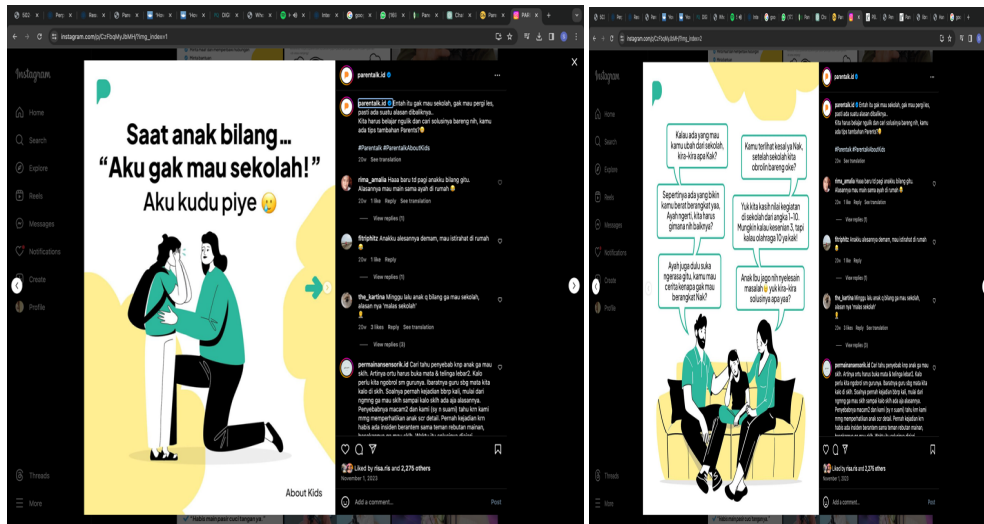


Image 2. A post about a child who refuses to go to school in account @parentalk.id.

In the post, a mother is depicted calming her child who refuses to go to school. The slide also includes the phrase “aku kudu piye” (what should I do) as an expression of a parent’s confusion in handling a child who doesn’t want to go to school. The issue of children refusing to attend school, also known as school refusal, is a significant concern for parents in Indonesia. This is because attending school is a mandatory obligation, especially with the nine-year compulsory education policy for children from elementary to high school (ages of primary and secondary school). Research by Ampuni & Andayani (2007) states that school is an essential part of the daily life of school-aged children and adolescents. According to the study, school refusal is a problem that should not be taken lightly, and addressing it involves both parents and the school. The post on @parentalk.id about school refusal implies that parents should feel anxious when their children do not want to attend school. Indirectly, this post also suggests that parents should discipline their children.

The discipline imposed on parents by @parentalk.id is, in reality, an expression of the parents’ lack of freedom in their parenting choices. The messages in these posts direct parents towards becoming the kind of parents as defined by @parentalk.id. This is one of the consequences of modernity. Giddens also introduced the concept of “self-therapy,” where parents continuously engage in reflective processes to become ideal parents. @parentalk.id, through its content, acts as a “therapist” by offering guidance on the steps parents should take to become ideal parents. However, this only increases anxiety, as parents who follow the account feel they must meet the parenting standards set by the account.

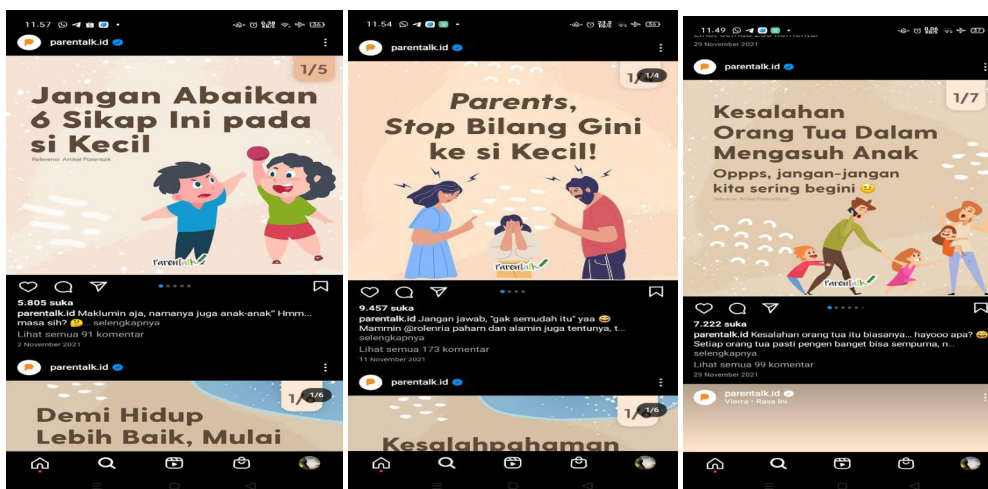


Image 3. Posts containing anxiety-inducing content in account @parentalk.id.

This aligns with the nature of the Instagram account @parentalk.id as a regime. All the posts are depicted using caricatures of parents (either a father or a mother) and children. These posts are filled with clearly stated words in large font sizes. One way to analyze the images, based on the multimodal method of Gunther Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), is through interpersonal analysis. In all these images, the gaze of the represented participants is not directed at the viewer, placing the viewer in the position of an observer. As observers, viewers are invited to observe what is shown in the image, as described by Kress & Leeuwen (1996). The posts use assertive language such as “don’t ignore” or “stop” and “parenting mistakes,” emphasizing that there are rules that parents must follow if they wish to be considered good parents. In this context, @parentalk.id not only provides parenting information but also disciplines parents to follow a specific parenting pattern that the account considers to be correct.

2. Uncertainty in Modernity and Parenting

As discussed by Ulrich Beck and Giddens, modernity brings uncertainty into various aspects of life, including child-rearing. Parents in the modern era face an overwhelming amount of rapidly evolving information, especially via social media, which adds to their confusion and anxiety. @parentalk.id capitalizes on this uncertainty by offering solutions to parenting problems, often accompanied by additional anxiety. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, @parentalk.id specifically addressed the impact of the pandemic on children’s empathy, creating the impression that the pandemic has a negative effect on child development. Posts that emphasize “the impact of the pandemic on children’s empathy” with exclamation marks convey an implicit warning to parents that they must be vigilant about the effects of the pandemic on their children. This adds to the anxiety for parents already facing challenges during the pandemic.



Image 4. Posts about the COVID-19 pandemic in account @parentalk.id.

Posts on @parentalk.id’s Instagram feed largely feature text-heavy verbal messages, which are reinforced by the captions below the posts. The language used contains implied threats that produce anxiety for its viewers. Language thus becomes a tool used to instill anxiety in parents. @parentalk.id uses these messages to intimidate parents into following specific child-rearing practices. In this context, language becomes a tool of power, employed by @parentalk.id to maintain its hegemony in delivering parenting information. According to Bourdieu, language is part of habitus and serves as both capital and a symbolic system. Bourdieu (1991) adds that language carries symbolic power between the giver and the receiver of information. The language used in @parentalk.id’s posts is a means of gaining power, dominating parents in the context of child-rearing. In this regard, the language in @parentalk.id’s posts functions not only to distribute parenting messages but also as a symbolic instrument for controlling parents.

3. Children’s Health as a Source of Anxiety

One of the main themes @parentalk.id uses to generate anxiety is children’s health. The account often emphasizes the importance of maintaining children’s health with messages that stress the need for caution. For example, a post titled “WARNING! Signs of Digestive Problems in Your Child” is accompanied by an image of a small child clutching his stomach, visually reinforcing that children’s health is something parents must seriously monitor.

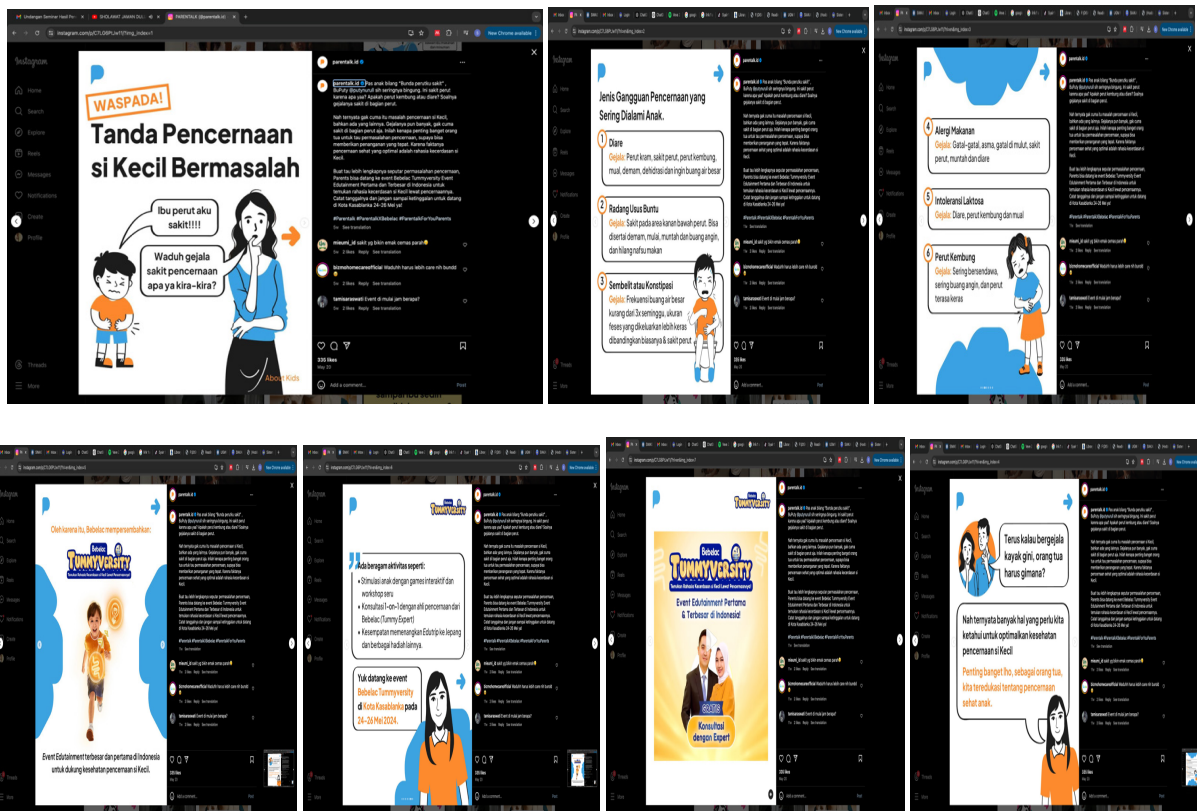


Image 5. Posts about children’s health in account @parentalk.id.

The post conveys a message that parents need to be attentive to their child’s health. It begins with the words “WARNING! Signs of Digestive Problems in Your Child” on the first slide, accompanied by an image of a young boy showing signs of stomach pain. The image underscores the concern over stomach-related issues. The word “WARNING!” signals that children’s health is a critical issue that parents must proactively address. The caption elaborates on the importance of parents identifying digestive issues in children so they can provide proper care. It also includes the phrase, “In fact, optimal digestive health is the secret to your child’s intelligence.” According to Gunther Kress, language alone is insufficient to capture semiotic meaning, and other modes of communication are required (Kress, 2010).

Ironically, these posts are often linked to commercial promotions, such as Bebelac infant formula. In one of its posts, @parentalk.id directs parents to attend a promotional event organized by Bebelac, promising that the product supports children's digestive health. However, in other posts, the account states that lactose (a component of infant formula) is one of the triggers of digestive issues in children. Parents seeking information about children's health on social media often face the challenge of low health literacy. Research by Frey et al. (2022) shows that an increasing number of parents turn to social media for health information, though the accuracy of this information is often questioned. In this regard, accounts like @parentalk.id play a critical role in shaping parental perceptions of children's health but often with a commercial agenda that exploits parental anxiety to promote specific products. Research by Svestkova et al. (2024) reveals that anxiety about children's health and that of their caregivers is often interconnected and should ideally be addressed together. However, @parentalk.id exploits this anxiety to further burden parents emotionally, creating dependency on the information it provides. Children's health becomes a benchmark for successful parenting, and @parentalk.id creates the narrative that good parents are those who optimally manage their children's health.

CONCLUSION

The Instagram account @parentalk.id plays a dual role as both a provider of information and a tool of social control for parents. As a "parenting regime," this account disciplines parents to follow strict parenting standards, adding to their anxiety through messages that emphasize what is right and wrong in child-rearing. Children's health is one of the main themes used to generate anxiety, which is then leveraged for commercial purposes. Although this account offers solutions to parenting issues, parents who follow it find themselves increasingly trapped in the anxiety produced by the account. Modernity, as discussed by Giddens and Beck, offers opportunities for individual freedom but also brings about heightened uncertainty and anxiety. In the context of parenting, @parentalk.id capitalizes on this uncertainty to direct parental behavior, creating a narrative of the ideal parent that is difficult to achieve. Thus, this study reveals how @parentalk.id uses anxiety as a tool to shape the narrative of ideal parenting, with the primary goal of increasing engagement and commercial profit through collaborations with certain brands. Parents who follow this account should be aware that they have the agency to decide the best way to raise their children, regardless of the pressures imposed by the standards set by the account.

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