"You'll learn to be the best dad ever!" A parenting app as a digital "more-knowledgeable-other" at the transition to fatherhood

DAVIDE CINO

Ricercatore di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale – Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca

Corresponding author: davide.cino@unimib.it

Abstract. Transition to parenthood is a transformative phase where first-time parents may feel the expectation of having to "learn" and "perform" a new social role. In this scenario, parenting apps are part of a broader media ecology new parents can rely on, as pedagogical agents providing informal education and support. This paper offers a critical-pedagogical analysis of a fathering app, investigating the type of parenting knowledge proposed and the broader overarching discourses it reflects. Findings show a double tendency. At a surface level, the app serves the practical purposes of offering new fathers solace and guidance; at a latent level, fatherhood is discursively "intensified", following intensive parenting trends, and "othered" as a different experience from motherhood, whereas the role of the father is constructed as both ancillary and controlling, reinforcing, besides trying to question, traditional family scripts.

Keywords. digital parenting; intensive parenting; family scripts; parenting app; fatherhood

1. Introduction

Transition to parenthood is recognized as a significant transformative phase for first-time parents. The term transition, here, is reflective of a change in cultural and pedagogical models associated with parenting, echoing contemporary narratives according to which "becoming a parent […] is perceived as a reflexive process and also implies a transformation of identity" (Magaraggia, 2012, p.77). In this phase of life, new parents are often expected to learn and perform a new social role (Cino & Formenti, 2021), which could be both challenging and overwhelming. Historically, women have always experienced the burden of performing a "good mother" identity to a greater extent than men (Hays, 1998); yet, social phenomena like industrialization, women's emancipation, a greater heterogeneity in family morphologies, contributed to a progressive change in family dynamics, with fathers starting to be more involved in their children's care and trying to emancipate themselves from the traditional breadwinner model (Dato & Loiodice, 2022).

Although to very different degrees for women and men, starting from the second half of the 20th century parenting "intensified" within a neoliberal framework emphasizing what is understood as a deterministic role mothers and fathers play in their children's upbringing and development, asking them to "learn" good parenting (Lee et al., 2014). Intensive parenting profoundly intersects with the use of media as informal educational milieus where parents can learn "how" to parent, quite often in a gendered stereotypical fashion (Formenti & Cino, 2023). Studies have investigated the role that parenting websites, forums, blogs, Facebook and Instagram pages, as well as parenting apps play towards the construction and de-construction of parenting pedagogical models (Bäckström et al., 2022; Qian & Hu, 2024). In this context, parenting apps – which are the focus of this contribution – emerged as part of the broader media ecology new parents can rely on for support and informal education. Working as pedagogical agents (Thomas et al., 2018), these apps provide guidance and information for expecting parents navigating new responsibilities. Although many studies have been conducted on parenting apps targeted at expecting mothers (Pangrazio et al., 2025), for women are in fact active users of digital media with respect to their parenting (Virani et al., 2021), less attention has been paid to parenting apps targeted at fathers.

Building on a digital ethnography of a parenting app targeted at Italian-speaking expecting fathers, and epistemologically informed by a critical pedagogy approach (Mariani, 2008; Massa, 1991), this paper reports on findings from a descriptive content analysis and a discourse analysis of the app to interrogate the type of parenting knowledge it promotes and the broader overarching discourses it reflects, both at a surface and at a latent level.

2. Transition to fatherhood and digital media use

Becoming a parent can be understood as both a transformative and performative event, which in industrialized neoliberal societies entails learning and enacting "good parenting" (Lee et al., 2014). Studies highlighted the challenges and transformations expecting parents, especially first-time parents, undergo during this period, marked by significant social, emotional, and practical changes as they transition into a new social role (Deave et al., 2008). Against this background, neoliberal pedagogical models, such as intensive parenting, encourage high levels of parental involvement and dedication as important variables deemed to define (in a deterministic fashion) children's life trajectories (Lee et al., 2014). As such, parents are expected to learn what is best for their child and act accordingly in their childrearing practices.

This trend intersects with gendered family scripts, where typically women are framed as the primary caregivers and fathers as secondary figures (Hays, 1998), with family roles being often still defined according to biological essentialism (Gaunt & Deutsch, 2024). Yet, as Höfner and colleagues (2011) argue, the role of fathers in Western societies has undergone profound changes that have been documented since the late 1960s, with two conflicting discourses still at play for (heterosexual) nuclear families: on one hand is the "breadwinner" discourse, built on traditional views of fathers as economic providers; on the other, the "new fathers" discourse promoting fathers' involvement and caring masculinity. The juxtaposition of these two tendencies, fostering different facets

of what a "good enough father" is, has been found to generate anxiety and pressure on some men at the transition to fatherhood (Ghaleiha et al., 2022). These men grapple with the dilemma of being both primary providers and "modern," involved fathers, often needing individual and interpersonal support (White et al., 2024). This struggle is compounded by the lack of previous pedagogical and cultural models to guide them, especially for younger generations of fathers (Ladlow, 2024). Research with first-time fathers also found that several men self-report lacking a solid support network for their fathering, being less involved in antenatal and post-natal education compared to women, and having little resources to rely on in this phase of life (van Vulpen et al., 2021).

In the digital age, many parents have incorporated digital media use into their daily parenting practices (Lupton et al., 2016), finding in them an ally to orient themselves at the transition to parenthood, being this an emotionally laden and information intense moment. A systematic review of expecting parents' use of digital media conducted by Bäckström and colleagues (2022) found that digital resources help reduce anxiety and worry and can promote empowerment through knowledge acquisition, social connections with peers and/or professionals, facilitate identification in the new role, but may also induce unrealistic expectations in terms of what is like to be a "good" parent. Different types of digital resources are used by parents, such as social media, online forums, blogs, videos, institutional websites, or mobile applications (the latter being the focus of this contribution). A review of research on the use of parenting apps in the first year of parenthood (Virani et al., 2021) found that their increased use is related to a number of factors, such as changing expectations from parents and the affirmation of "scientific" parenting, shorter postnatal hospital stays leading parents to be in need of support in a delicate moment they may not find in traditional networks of support, as well as the potential geographical distance from their family of origins.

Although digital resources are mostly targeted at and used by women (Lupton et al., 2016), some studies have focused on their use by fathers as well, conveying the representation of a specific segment of users being mostly white, middle-class, and heterosexuals (Scheibling, 2020). Research, for example, shows that fathers appreciate online fathering community attributing to them personal and familial benefits, such as having a safe space to connect with peers, offering and gaining social, informational, and emotional support, and making sense of their parenting experiences (Mancini et al., 2023). Digital ecologies such as dad blogs have been found to help reconstruct fatherhood by doing and undoing gender norms, challenging traditional masculinity and promoting caring parenting practices (Scheibling, 2020). When it comes to fathering apps, research by Thomas and colleagues (2018) found that these act as pedagogical agents that provide fathers with knowledge about pregnancy and childbirth. However, they often trivialize fathers' roles, delivering educational contents in a humorous and entertaining fashion. The authors argue that this approach promotes an idea of fathers as less attentive compared to mothers and in need of quick and easy solutions to their parenting issues, thus acting as "sociocultural artefacts that convey information and draw on and reproduce dominant meanings, tacit assumptions and practices" (p. 761) about caregiving. Additionally, they build on "middle-class, neoliberal assumptions about the individual's capacity and responsibility for educating themselves and acting upon information, positioning parenthood as autonomous and privatized" (p. 766). The authors also emphasize the paucity of

literature on the matter, calling for further research to better understand parenting apps as members of the media ecology expecting fathers can rely on today, a step this work takes in that direction.

3. Conceptualizing parenting apps as "digital-more-knowledgeable others"

Parenting apps have become increasingly popular among parents, offering accessible sources of support and information and providing a plethora of educational resources, such as informative texts, tips, videos and features aimed at helping parents navigate childrearing (Virani et al., 2021). In this paper, building on scholarship emphasizing the informal educational role of digital media (Cino, 2023; Tramma, 2009), I mobilize the Vygotskyian concept of the "digital more knowledgeable other" (Vygotskij, 1978) as a metaphor that recognizes the epistemic and deontic work (Caronia, 2024a) performed by parenting apps as pedagogical agents (Thomas et al., 2019). Theoretically, this view comes with at least two implications.

First, embracing a media ecology perspective (Granata, 2015), it invites us to understand a media artefact like an app as an informal learning environment, acknowledging its educational nature, for learning happens in heterogeneous contexts, especially when it comes to parenting knowledge that is transmitted informally through daily micro-pedagogical processes (Formenti & Cino, 2023; Jarvis, 2012). This entails recognizing the educational potential of parenting apps despite our personal axiological frames, considering how they facilitate the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge on a certain epistemic object (here, parenting) promoting, more than determining, certain learning outcomes, whether they be based on scientific, semi-scientific, or lay knowledge (Cino, 2023).

Second, challenging humancentric epistemologies in pedagogical research, it opens to new materialism, framing the more-knowledgeable "other" as a more-than-human agent (Ferrante, 2024; Palmieri, 2017). Parenting apps, I argue, fit this framework well, as they function epistemically and symbolically as social artifacts, aligning with theories on the agency of things (Caronia, 2024b; Caronia & Mortari, 2015). Such a view helps us move beyond the notion that only media facilitating social interaction can be considered educational, for parenting apps are in and for themselves conduits of pedagogical knowledge and specific cultural models. This assumption is in line with the fact that, thanks to their sociomaterial configurations and affordances, apps can be understood within the realm of those more-than-human agents that actively contribute to the construction of individual and collective identities, moral and social orders, while shaping our everyday understandings of social life and educational events (Caronia, 2024b).

4. The present study

Although parenting apps represent one of the digital repertoire fathers can rely on, the paucity of literature on the topic suggests that the contents and discourses of these apps warrant further research. In this paper I explore how they construct and convey parenting knowledge, presenting findings from a digital ethnography-informed investigation (Pink et al., 2015) of the fathering app Super Papà ("Super Dad"), by MAMB

Apps. I purposively sampled this app because of its being free of charge, thus more accessible compared to paid applications, its availability in Italian, making it a potential resource for Italian fathers (although it is possible to select also the English and Spanish language), as well as its stated aims of supporting fathers at the transition to parenthood. This study does not aim at generalizable or comparative knowledge but is more focused with an in-depth analysis of a specific app, understood as an informal educational environment fathers can turn to, mindful of the indexicality of such an epistemic and hermeneutic work and in line with qualitative research epistemological principles (Caronia, 1997; Creswell, 2014).

According to its description page on Google Play, Super Papà is a "guide for new fathers", helping them learn about parenting from pregnancy to the birth of the baby and beyond. It is an app "created by dads for dads", aiming at making the parenting journey easier for fathers and make them become "super dads". The app was released in November 2019 and, as of June 2024, was downloaded more than 10.000 times.

In analyzing this app, my goal was to explore an example of a digital pedagogical agent targeted (also) at Italian-speaking fathers, guided by two exploratory research questions:

RQ1: What types of content and through which organization are presented in the app?
RQ2: What underlying discourses and parenting ideologies do these contents convey?

In this study, two distinct yet complementary analytic procedures, content analysis and discourse analysis (see Hardy et al., 2004), were conducted to understand the parenting knowledge conveyed through the Super Papà app. Informed by principles from the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2016), after downloading the app and familiarizing myself with each section, which served as my unit of analysis, I reviewed its contents and took fieldnotes while applying my double analytic approach.

To answer my first research question, at a surface level, content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006) focused on the explicit messages of the app in terms of practical advice, guidance, and resources offered to fathers. This process was descriptive and inductive, coding the materials to explore these dimensions. Each app section was reviewed in detail, and data were recorded in fieldnotes, with codes developed inductively to categorize topics such as health, emotional support, and partner involvement. This step aimed to capture the app's overt pedagogical messages, such as weekly updates on fetal development and advice on parental roles.

To answer my second research question, at a latent level, I conducted a discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) of said materials to delve deeper into the underlying discourses and symbolic representations embedded in the app, inspired by a critical pedagogy framework (Mariani, 2008; Massa, 1991). This step was focused on uncovering covert meanings and cultural assumptions embedded within the app's content, investigating how fatherhood was constructed in both explicit texts and symbolic representations. The analysis was sensitive to markers of gender and cultural norms and drew on critical pedagogy to interrogate implicit messages about parental roles, particularly around themes of responsibility, masculinity, and caregiving.

Taken together, these two methods enabled a comprehensive exploration of both the practical and ideological dimensions of the app. Notwithstanding, while the surface and the latent levels are conceptually distinct –with the former focusing on the explicit content, and the latter on its deeper symbolic and ideological meanings– they are not to be understood as entirely discrete units. This is because media texts, such as those analyzed in this study, inherently intertwine explicit informational content with implicit cultural frameworks and belief systems (Fairclough, 1995). For example, as we shall see, seemingly practical advice or descriptions within the app, such as timelines or to-do lists, also operate within broader narratives about parenting roles, responsibilities, and identity formation. This integration reflects the dual nature of media as both conveyors of information and producers of meaning (Antelmi, 2006). Attempting to fully isolate the surface from the latent risks oversimplifying the layered ways in which texts communicate. Therefore, while in this study I distinguish these levels analytically, I also acknowledge that they operate dialectically and reciprocally, with the connotative meanings often emerging from the arrangement and framing of denotative elements, and vice versa. This perspective, epistemologically informed by systems theory, which posits the entanglement of forms, contents, and discourses (Bateson, 1972; Formenti & Cino, 2023), allows for a more nuanced understanding of how the app simultaneously shapes and constructs paternal identities.

5. Findings and discussions

In the following paragraphs I will first provide a descriptive account of the contents of the app and their configuration, presenting findings from content analysis to answer RQ$_1$; then I will move to some of the more latent discourses I identified through my discourse analysis, to answer RQ$_2$. Excerpts will be reported using the English version of the app, which is the official translation of the Italian version, to stay grounded to the actual words used in the application.

5.1 A milieu of informal learning and support: the surface level

In this section I will address my first research question, describing the types of content presented in the app and their organization.

Super Papà presents to me as an easy-to-use app, with an intuitive interface. Its logo is a "P" framed within a triangle, readapting the Superman symbol. This is a common iconography used to describe the condition of contemporary parents within a neoliberal framework, asked to balance heroic levels of involvement and responsibility in childrearing, with the pressures of individual productivity and self-optimization, thus embodying the ideals of intensive parenting (Nicola, 2017). When accessing the app, the user can indicate if the baby is already born or not. If not, the app will be tailored to the moment the expecting dad is living, showing a timeline of pregnancy where each week is marked by an image of the developing fetus and a brief informative description of what it entails and how the baby is developing in the womb, as in the following excerpt, covering the 32nd week:

Your baby is making final preparations for his/her appearance. The fine covering of body hair called lanugo is falling off, and hair remains only where it's meant to be (on the eyelashes, eyebrows, and head). The baby is usually lying with their head pointing downwards, ready for birth! Length: 42.4 cm. Weight: 1702 grams. (Super Papà, MAMB Apps)

In the main page, a timer positioned into a circle indicates the weeks until delivery, with the circle progressing more each week as the due date approaches. Within the circle is an image of a father dressed in a Superman-style costume, with the framed "P" symbol replacing the "S". Behind him are a little boy and a little girl. The father has a proud and confident look, while the children look amused, conveying the message of a superhero dad who knows how to navigate parenting (a symbology already reported in fathers' words in other studies to define caring fatherhood – see Höfner et al., 2011; Scheibling, 2020).

The app is articulated in six sections: *She's pregnant*, *Birth*, *After the baby is born*, *Baby development*, *Accessories*, *Tools*. Each one has its own subsections. Topics covered concern healthy eating, breastfeeding, exercising, changes in sexual and emotional relationships between parents, birth preparation, places and modalities to give birth, the role of the father during pregnancy, birth and after, breastfeeding, sleep routines, developmental stages, etc.

To exemplify this app's contents, I will now focus on the *She's pregnant* section, which begins with the following description:

"I'm pregnant!": with these few words your life officially changes forever. Many congratulations! *Your journey to becoming a Super Dad has begun*! But don't panic, *help is here*. Super Dad App is here to help you on your way to *becoming the best dad that you can ever be!* […] What can you do? […] Take this time *to learn* more about pregnancy and babies. This App *will help you* to discover all these new things that a new daddy *needs to know*. (Super Papà, MAMB Apps, author's emphasis)

In this paragraph the app presents itself as both an informal learning environment and a more knowledgeable agent aiming at supporting the expecting dad and fill the gap between his current knowledge and the potential and (socially) desirable knowledge he is expected to acquire. In doing so, it also enunciates the role the father is supposed to be playing during this process: making sure the baby and the mother are healthy, and using the app to learn everything he needs to know. The role of the app is clear: acting as a more-knowledgeable-other that will teach the expecting father what it takes to be a Super Dad.

Each section of the app tends to follow the same structure, with every subsection having an informative text followed by a "What you can do" bullet point list. For example, in the "What next" subsection, aimed at educating fathers on what they can expect and are "supposed" to do from the moment they find out about pregnancy, a to-do list is provided, including tasks like bringing the partner to regular health checks, making sure she gets enough rest and stays hydrated, attending birth and breastfeeding preparation classes, and checking the "countdown and timeline in this App to follow [the] baby's development" (Super Papà, MAMB Apps).

The content analysis illuminated how the Super Papà app serves as a structured guide for fathers, framing their role within a narrative of practical and constant support that aligns with mainstream understandings of intensive parenting, as well as other parenting apps' material configurations (Lee et al., 2014; Pangrazio et al., 2025). Each section, from prenatal milestones to parenting routines, emphasizes a specific set of expectations for fathers, detailing behaviors and responsibilities to enact supportive roles. This structure appears to encourage a form of involved masculinity, where fatherhood is grounded in emotional and logistical support without equal emphasis on autonomous decision-making or shared parental authority. Interestingly, the app's organization reflects what can be described as a "step-by-step" pedagogical approach, where information is incrementally revealed in a way that builds a particular supportive and informed fathering identity.

Additionally, the app provides fathers with insiders' perspectives (being written "by fathers for fathers"), but also with hyperlinks to external official documents, such as the World Health Organization Recommendations on Intrapartum Care for a Positive Childbirth Experience (WHO, 2018), quotes from national or regional laws, such as the guidelines from Regione Lombardia on home birth and midwife led units ("case maternità"), informational images, such as those on teething, or explicative videos on how to change a diaper and bathe a baby. The epistemic authority is constructed through a mixture of lay, legal, and scientific knowledge (Benveniste, 1971; Cino, 2020). Using multimodal resources, at a surface level the app is constructed as a milieu of informal learning and support for expecting and new fathers. Its features emphasize practical tasks and recommendations aimed at guiding the user through specific moments of pregnancy and parenting. This includes explicit descriptions of biological milestones, health suggestions, and technical advice, making the app a highly accessible tool for first-time fathers. However, "the informational content of an enunciation (or text) does not fully account for its semantic one" (Antelmi, 2006, p.82, author's translation). As we shall see in the next paragraph, at a more latent level the app constructs an idealized paternal identity by embedding these practical instructions within cultural expectations of intensive and supportive fatherhood. This dual-layered structure accentuates the need to interrogate how informational content may simultaneously reproduce broader discursive frameworks about gendered roles in parenting.

5.2 Othering and intensifying fatherhood, surveilling motherhood: the latent level

In this paragraph I will address my second research question, exploring the underlying discourses and parenting ideologies that this app's contents convey at a latent level.

According to Fairclough (1995), media texts project meanings and worldviews that, if not interrogated, tend to become invisible and taken for granted. Parenting apps are no exception to this notion. Starting from the name and visual representation of Super Papà, it is clear that the app is imbued with specific intensive parenting frameworks (Lee et al., 2014) calling into play the "good father" identity of the user, marking at once: a lacking initial position the father finds himself in (the gap the app aims to fill), the route to take to move forward from this position (through the educational materials and the advice provided by the app), and the destination to reach (becoming a "Super Dad", thus

learning a specific fatherhood identity). In my analysis I found that fatherhood is discursively constructed as an *othered* and *intensified* experience.

In this paper, readapting Jensen's conceptualization (2011), I refer to *othering* as a process through which a social group and a belief system this group identifies with is characterized in contrast to another. In my analysis of the app, I found this happens at a twofold level. First, by constructing fatherhood as a caring and involved experience, which means othering it from hegemonic masculinity (as also reported in Locke & Yarwood, 2017). Then, by marking stereotypical gendered differences between men and women in parenting, constructing the father as a secondary care figure (Cino & Dalledonne Vandini, 2023). The first instance is detectable in the very same goal of having fathers play an active role through pregnancy and after, thus promoting an ideal that distances itself from traditional notions of fatherhood (Dato & Loiodice, 2022). The second is somehow subtle, yet evident in several occurrences. For example, starting from pregnancy, the father is told that he "might not feel the transformation to parenthood now (*as she does*) until after the baby is born" (Super Papà, MAMB Apps, author's emphasis), marking a difference between him and the mother for which the app comes in help so that he can be more involved and feel part of the process. Or, as in the birth section, emphasizing, with respect to delivery, that "this is just one of the jobs only mamma can do! Fear not though, you do have a role here as most modern-day women prefer that their partners are fully involved" (Super Papà, MAMB Apps). Parental involvement is constructed here as a fact of modernity and a consequence to a will of the mother, more than something the father himself may desire. The mother is, in fact, presented as the primary figure of care, while the father is more ancillary, as exemplified by this other excerpt on his role during birth:

> You are primarily there to emotionally support your other half and to literally *wait on her hand and foot* and that means *to do anything she asks* from bringing her a bottle of water, massaging her feet, changing the music to speaking to the midwifes on her behalf (Super Papà, MAMB Apps, author's emphasis).

Although all of the above speaks for a sort of supremacy that the mother is framed to have over the pregnancy and birthing experience, the role of the father is intensified within this framework, for he needs to overview and facilitate the whole process. This intensification is both symbolic (i.e., assuming the identity of a "Super" dad), and practical, through the amount of knowledge the father is supposed to acquire through the app and all the concrete steps he needs to take to become the "best version possible" of himself as a parent. A parent whose role during pregnancy is "to help mamma and baby be as *healthy* and happy as they can be" (Super Papà, MAMB Apps, author's emphasis). In doing so, however, I found that the intensification of fatherhood is strictly related and even functional to the intensification of motherhood as well: fathers need to learn a good father identity to ensure mothers will too. As an example of this process, I will refer here to some occurrences revolving around the topics of healthy pregnancy and breastfeeding, illustrative of specific moral imperatives and parenting identities (Smyth, 2012).

According to the app, healthy pregnancy entails undergoing regular health checks, avoiding drinking, smoking, and using drugs, healthy eating, and exercising. The father is invited to give a good example to the mother, avoiding any form of temptation to show

he is committed to his role, while also monitoring what her partner is doing. The following excerpts exemplify some of these instances:

> Your growing son/daughter is starting life with a clean state so why not start their little life in *the best possible way. To help your partner achieve this*, as a family, try to eliminate junk food and fast food from your diet. *Bring out the chef in you*, order a recipe book or App and cook fresh! Food worth thinking about: fresh fruit/veg, lentils, pulses, grains, fish (avoid high-mercury fish e.g. swordfish) […].

> *Go hiking or swimming together*. Check out new walking trails and visit old ones. […] Also, don't forget to pop by your *local farmer's market* to pick up some *fresh seasonal fruit and veg*. (Super Papà, MAMB Apps, author's emphasis)

Although the excerpts above can sound as common-sense advice, we can notice how if on one hand the goal is to invite fathers to be more involved in the whole pregnancy process and everything it entails, this is done by taking for granted the monitoring and surveillance of the pregnant body (Cosgrove & Vaswani, 2020; Formenti, 2014), and the assumption that parents have financial and time resources to respect imperatives concerning buying certain foods, preparing homemade meals, or exercising regularly. The father is here asked to both actively modify his lifestyle "as if" he was pregnant himself, adapting to the changes the mother is undergoing, while also performing *pregnancy policing* (Fox et al., 2009): controlling the mother's behavior by governing her food intake and physical exercise. The indication of buying healthy food at the "local farmer's market" (which is different from a regular supermarket) and cooking fresh meals at home calls into play a broader *politics of hunger* (Lee, 2015), within a neoliberal framework of individual responsibility concerning "feeding" the pregnant body, overlooking the possibility that the user may not afford the promoted lifestyle, nor have the time for physical exercise or to "bring out the chef" in him. These texts contribute to delineate a very specific segment of users, potentially educated and upper-middle class. While tailoring the advice provided to every potential recipient may not be feasible, what I believe is important to emphasize here is the construction of an elitarian ideal type of father, framing caring and involved fatherhood as both an exercise of control of the partner's body, and a privilege.

The topic of nutrition in family life is a site for broader social, interpersonal, and individual surveillance embedded with common sense knowledge and moral expectations, where fathers are asked today to play an active role as well (Metcalfe et al., 2009). The app promotes this controlling approach not only during pregnancy but also after the baby is born, as the framing of breastfeeding shows. The topic is introduced with an immediate reference to the World Health Organization as an institutional subject of the enunciation with a strong epistemic authority (Benveniste, 1971), claiming that it "recommends that babies are *exclusively breastfed* for the first six month of life with continued breastfeeding along with appropriate complementary foods up to two years of age or beyond" (Super Papà, MAMB Apps, author's emphasis). In the following excerpts we can see a contradictory discourse contributing to a double bind (Formenti, 2012): first, breastfeeding is constructed as the primary and more desirable choice, then it is argued that women can make the "informed-decision" not to breastfeed, but that this choice is determined by the lack of a supportive family and society for which the "good" father needs to act properly:

Breastfeeding is the *normal* way to feed baby. In the early days this can be very tough for mamma, physically and emotionally. *The more support a mother has to breastfeed the easier it will be for her* […]. *Breast milk is not only about food*, it is also about [*immune system*], *love* and *protection*. Therefore, by *supporting and encouraging* your partner to breastfeed, you are in fact giving them the *most valuable gift* […] as baby and mamma will feel the *benefits for a lifetime w*hich include lowered risk of certain diseases including *cancer* – something money cannot buy.

[…] there may be instances where a woman cannot breastfeed or has made an informed-decision not to breastfeed. […] Lack of breastfeeding support by partners, family and society in general are one of the *main contributing factors* to women choosing not to breastfeed or to stopping breastfeeding earlier than the recommended duration. Therefore *support is key*!

(Super Papà, MAMB Apps, author's emphasis)

Following Smyth (2012), the moral imperative of breastfeeding (actively encouraged even in other apps for fathers and parents in general – Pangrazio et al., 2025; Thomas et al., 2018) is here part of an "instrumental account of rational actions" where the *good choice* to breastfeed is also framed as the more rational one, contributing to the moralization of parenthood, individualized and de-contextualized courses of actions, and the view of women's bodies as "pliable instruments of human intentions" (p. 182). Discursive strategies deployed to promote breastfeeding encompass the emphasis placed on its naturalness, its lifetime positive consequences, and the avoidance of health risks (i.e., "cancer"). Breastfeeding, then, is framed as the best choice possible, and the choice not to do it as something that can be avoided by supporting the partner. At once, the father is once again constructed as an agent of moral policing and the mother as a subject to control, whose capacity of making informed decisions in avoiding breastfeeding is only partially contemplated, for this is understood as a consequence of a lack of support more than a deliberate situational choice. The father is also invited to "protect mamma's decision to breastfeed" from "well-meaning family and friends" who "may not understand breastfeeding and may put pressure on you and mamma to stop", a dangerous occurrence for which the father is invited to "step in […] and protect mamma and baby from potentially harmful pressure" (Super Papà, MAMB Apps). In this case, family members and friends are framed as a potential risk factor the good father needs to tackle.

The subject of nutrition, although not covering the full range of topics addressed by the app, was here mobilized as particularly illustrative of how discourses of good fatherhood and motherhood intertwines within an unbalanced power relation. Such an approach, I argue, may generate a paradox. On one hand, fathers are asked to intensify their parental role while othering themselves from hegemonic patriarchal forms of masculinity based on detached parenting practices. In doing so, they are asked to embrace a more caring and involved attitude towards their partners and children, while their experience is even othered from that of mothers and constructed as more ancillary. On the other, however, this position comes also with a monitoring and controlling attitude towards women's bodies and practices, from pregnancy onwards, that reproduces stereotypical gendered family scripts in different forms. The identity formation of the "good father", in fact, rests here on implicit discourses contributing to the construction of parenting knowledge that risks not

only not to be grounded in contemporary families' lived experiences, but also to replicate stereotypical scripts within an individualistic neoliberal parenting framework based on the crystallization of certain moral imperatives. Indeed, findings from the discourse analysis further revealed that, in addition to offering practical advice, the app implicitly constructs fatherhood evoking traditional family scripts based on more or less subtle forms of male supremacy over women. The critical pedagogy lens (Mariani, 2008; Massa, 1991) highlights how this discursive construction of fatherhood reflects broader cultural values, particularly within neoliberal frameworks that idealize parental involvement as both intensive and individually driven. Fathers are also encouraged to embody a version of a paternal identity that not only supports but surveils the partner, a theme resonant with studies on paternal policing within intensive parenting (Fox et al., 2009). This dual role, of both supporting and overseeing, suggests a form of paternal authority where involvement is framed as "being actively present" but on terms that are rooted in traditional assumptions about family roles and unbalanced power dynamics.

6. Concluding remarks and future directions

This paper presented a descriptive and critical analysis of a parenting app as a digital more-knowledgeable-other fathers can rely on at the transition to parenthood. Although well-intentioned and aimed at providing solace and guidance, findings showed that parenting apps for dads may perpetuate both conventional and intensified understandings of fatherhood. Indeed, although the app strives to engage fathers by providing practical advice and encouragement, traditional gendered family roles were not only questioned, but also reconstructed and reinforced, positioning fathers as both ancillary and controlling figures within the family. This double narrative reflects broader societal trends in "intensive parenting" (Lee et al., 2014), where both mothers and fathers are encouraged to embody highly involved roles, within a framework of broader forms of social surveillance aimed at controlling the pregnant body (Andrejevic, 2004; Formenti, 2014; Monahan, 2011). In this regard, the app constructs fatherhood in ways that, rather than challenging stereotypical roles, subtly ratify them, particularly through the policing of mothers' behaviors and a focus on control rather than equality in caregiving roles. In doing so, I argue, not only does the app support the intensive parenting philosophy, but also does not challenge gendered norms embedded with certain parenting practices.

Findings from this work align with scholarship on the "new father" discourse, which emphasizes fathers' emotional involvement yet often frames them as secondary aides in parenting, rather than equal actors, leaving most of the parenting burdens on mothers (Höfner et al., 2011; Scheibling, 2020). Additionally, parenting apps like Super Papà are situated within a neoliberal framework, promoting individualized responsibility while perpetuating a specific ideal of "good" fatherhood that may not fully resonate with diverse family structures or values. Indeed, the contents of the app do not account for parenting experiences that differ from a traditional, middle-class, and heteronormative configuration. Indeed, by embedding neoliberal ideals in digital platforms (Pangrazio et al., 2025), parenting apps are acting as "digital more-knowledgeable-others" (Vygotsky, 1978), shaping users' beliefs and expectations. While helpful, this potential influence suggests a need to critically evaluate the pedagogical impact of digital tools on family

life, particularly to avoid inadvertently promoting limited or stereotypical roles. This has implications for developers and educators. The former might consider how to represent a more nuanced and inclusive model of fatherhood that reflects contemporary family dynamics and go beyond normative accounts of parenthood. The latter, in recognizing parenting apps as part of the broader media ecology parents can rely on, could use them in their practice with parents as tools for reflective learning, promoting a more critical and deliberate use, interrogating the premises behind them. The joint goal would be promoting a more inclusive and complex representation of fatherhood, to avoid perpetuating stereotypical family scripts.

In this regard, the present study provided some valuable insights into the pedagogical and ideological dimensions of a parenting app targeted at fathers during the transition to fatherhood, here understood as a transformative phase during the course of life (Magaraggia, 2012). Some aspects, however, need to be address. First, it is important to bear in mind that the focus on a single app, Super Papà, although epistemologically and methodologically motivated (as explained in previous passages of this work), offers us insights concerning one of the many parenting apps constelling the broader ecosystems of digital resources available to parents. Different applications may convey different discourses and pedagogical approaches worth exploring. This is even more relevant in light of the fact that this app's content primarily reflects traditional, heteronormative, middle-class family configurations grounded in Western cultural models, leaving out the experiences of heterogeneous families, including LGBTQ+ parents, families with different cultural backgrounds, low-income families, single-parent households, just to mention some examples. It is also important to emphasize that the accessibility of such apps may be hindered for parents with limited digital skills, inadequate access to the internet and technology, or socio-economic constraints. It follows from here that the app's user base may reflect a more privileged segment of parents, such as those with higher levels of education and more familiar with digital tools. This form of "elitism" serves as a reminder that parenting apps represent only one of the many potential informal educational experiences parents may have at the transition to parenthood (and, specifically, here, fatherhood), rather than a universally applicable resource. Their study, however, is notwithstanding important since they do, as argued before, constitute a conduit of pedagogical knowledge out there contributing to broader discourses on contemporary parenthood.

Future research could expand this line of inquiry through comparative cross-sectional studies of multiple parenting apps across different cultural and social contexts to examine the variability in their pedagogical frameworks and the inclusivity of their content. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could explore how fathers engage with these apps over time and whether they significantly influence, if at all, their paternal identities and parenting practices. Multi-method approaches, combining digital ethnography with in-depth interviews, user feedback and app usage data could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how digital tools impact parenting behaviors and broader societal discourses on fatherhood. Importantly, future studies might also investigate strategies for improving the inclusivity and accessibility of parenting apps. This could include exploring user-centered design approaches with diverse family configurations, integrating features to support parents with limited digital literacy, and developing apps with offline functions to accommodate those with inconsistent internet access. Moreo-

ver, partnerships between app developers, educational researchers, educators, and families could ensure that these digital resources address the needs of underrepresented and underserved populations, thereby broadening their pedagogical and practical relevance, while avoiding perpetuating stereotypical frameworks.

Ultimately, the present study highlights the importance of scrutinizing parenting apps as one of the digital resources available to fathers during the transition to parenthood. By focusing on one of them, it offers a case study illuminating some of the ways these tools disseminate parenting knowledge, potentially informing paternal identities, and may reflect broader, and sometimes stereotypical and controlling, societal discourses on "doing" good parenting (Cino, 2020; Geinger et al., 2014). This work makes a step towards the understanding of digital tools as mediators of contemporary parenting practices and opens critical avenues for further research.

Acknowledgments

References

Andrejevic, M. (2004). The work of watching one another: Lateral surveillance, risk, and governance. *Surveillance & Society, 2*(4), 479–497.

Antelmi, D. (2006). *Il discorso dei media*. Roma: Carocci.

Bäckström, C., Carlén, K., Larsson, V., Mårtensson, L. B., Thorstensson, S., Berglund, M., Larsson, T., Bouwmeester, B., Wilhsson, M. & Larsson, M. (2022). Expecting parents' use of digital sources in preparation for parenthood in a digitalised society–a systematic review. *Digital Health*, *8*, 1-15.

Bateson, G. (1972/1976). *Verso un'ecologia della mente*. Milano: Adelphi.

Benveniste, É. (1971). *Problemi di linguistica generale*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.

Caronia, L. (1997). *Costruire la conoscenza. Interazione e interpretazione nella ricerca in campo educativo*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.

Caronia, L. (2024a). Epistemic and deontic authority in parent–teacher conference: referring to the expert as a discursive practice to (jointly) undermine the teacher's expertise. *Journal of Teacher Education, 75*(4), 397-411.

Caronia, L. (2024b). La materialità nella pedagogia fenomenologica: una sfida teoretica. In Barone, P., Cucuzza, G., & Ferrante, A. (a cura di), *Ecologie della materia. Educazione e materialità nello scenario contemporaneo* (pp. 41-54). Milano: Franco Angeli.

Caronia, L., & Mortari, L. (2015). The agency of things: how spaces and artefacts organize the moral order of an intensive care unit. *Social Semiotics*, *25*(4), 401-422.

Cino, D. (2020). Fare e disfare la "buona" maternità online: costruzioni e decostruzioni di un modello pedagogico. *Encyclopaideia*, *24*(58), 75-86.

Cino, D. (2023). Ambienti digitali e contenuti mediali nella ricerca pedagogica: premesse epistemologiche e spunti metodologici. *Studium Educationis, 24*(1), 96-104.

Cino, D. & Dalledonne Vandini, C. (2023). The Social Construction of Fatherhood Online: A Pedagogical Analysis on Contemporary Paternal Narratives. *Formazione & Insegnamento, 21*(1), 11-19.

Cino, D., & Formenti, L. (2021). To share or not to share? That is the (social media) dilemma. Expectant mothers questioning and making sense of performing pregnancy on social media. *Convergence*, *27*(2), 491-507.

Cosgrove, L., & Vaswani, A. (2020). Fetal rights, the policing of pregnancy, and meanings of the maternal in an age of neoliberalism. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 40*(1), 43–53.

Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage

Dato, D., & Loiodice, I. (2022). La Famiglia tra Permanenza, Resilienza e Cambiamento. *MeTis-Mondi educativi. Temi indagini suggestioni*, *12*(1), I-III.

Deave, T., Johnson, D., & Ingram, J. (2008). Transition to parenthood: the needs of parents in pregnancy and early parenthood. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, *8*, 1-11.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. London: Edward Arnold.

Ferrante, A. (2024). New materialism e pedagogia. In Barone, P., Cucuzza, G., & Ferrante, A. (a cura di), *Ecologie della materia. Educazione e materialità nello scenario contemporaneo* (pp. 55-72). Milano: Franco Angeli.

Formenti L. (2012) (a cura di). *Re-inventare la famiglia. Guida teorico-pratica per i professionisti dell'educazione*. Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli.

Formenti, L. (2014). The myth of birth: Autobiography and family memory. In L. Formenti, L. West, & W. Horsdal (Eds.), *Embodied narratives: Connecting stories, bodies, cultures and ecologies* (pp. 129–148). Odense, Denmark: University Press of Southern Denmark.

Formenti, L. & Cino, D. (2023). *Oltre il senso comune. Un viaggio di ricerca nella pedagogia della famiglia*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Fox, R., Nicolson, P., & Heffernan, K. (2009). Pregnancy police? Maternal bodies, surveillance and food. In Jackson, P. (Ed.), *Changing families, changing food* (pp. 57-74). Palgrave Macmillan: London.

Gaunt, R., & Deutsch, F. M. (2024). Mother's instinct? Biological essentialism and parents' involvement in work and childcare. *Sex Roles, 90*(2), 267-279.

Geinger, F., Vandenbroeck, M., & Roets, G. (2014). Parenting as a performance: Parents as consumers and (de)constructors of mythic parenting and childhood ideals. *Childhood*, *21*(4), 488-501.

Ghaleiha, A., Barber, C., Tamatea, A. J., & Bird, A. (2022). Fathers' help seeking behavior and attitudes during their transition to parenthood. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, *43*(5), 756-768.

Granata, P. (2015). *Ecologia dei media. Protagonisti, scuole, concetti chiave*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Hardy, C., Harley, B., Phillips, N. (2004). Discourse analysis and content analysis: two solitudes? *Qualitative Methods, 2*(1), 19-22.

Hays, S. (1998). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Höfner, C., Schadler, C., & Richter, R. (2011). When men become fathers: Men's identity at the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *42*(5), 669-686.

Jarvis, P. (2012). Learning from everyday life. *HSSRP, 1*, 1-20.

Jensen, S. (2011). Othering, Identity Formation and Agency. *Qualitative Studies 2*(2), 63–78.

Ladlow, L. (2024). 'I don't feel like a young dad. I feel like an unprepared dad': young parenthood, welfare support and accelerated transitions to adulthood in the UK and Sweden. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1-16.

Lee, E., Bristow, J., Faircloth, C. & Macvarish, J. (2014). *Parenting culture studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lee, R. (2016). Feeding the hungry other: Levinas, breastfeeding, and the politics of hunger. *Hypatia, 31*(2), 259-274.

Light, B., Burgess, J., & Duguay, S. (2018). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society, 20*(3), 881-900.

Locke, A., & Yarwood, G. (2017). Exploring the depths of gender, parenting and 'work': critical discursive psychology and the 'missing voices' of involved fatherhood. *Community, Work & Family, 20*(1), 4-18.

Lupton, D., Pedersen, S., & Thomas, G. M. (2016). Parenting and Digital Media: from the Early Web to Contemporary Digital Society. *Sociology Compass, 10*(8), 730-743.

Magaraggia, S. (2013). Tensions between fatherhood and the social construction of masculinity in Italy. *Current sociology*, *61*(1), 76-92.

Mancini, V. O., Takeda, R., Nagar, A., & Robison, B. W. (2023). "Connection, community and convenience": A case study of a Facebook group for fathers navigating parenthood. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, *34*(4), 702-713.

Mariani, A. (2008). *La decostruzione in pedagogia. Una frontiera teorico-educativa della postmodernità*. Roma: Armando Editore.

Massa, R. (1991) (a cura di). *Saperi, scuola. Formazione. Quaderni di pedagogia critica. Materiali per la formazione del pedagogista*. Milano: Unicopli.

Metcalfe, A., Dryden, C., Johnson, M., Owen, J., Shipton, G. (2009). Fathers, Food and Family Life. In Jackson, P. (Ed.), *Changing families, changing food* (pp. 93-117). Palgrave Macmillan: London.

Monahan, T. (2011). Surveillance as cultural practice. *The Sociological Quarterly, 52*(4), 495-508.

Nicola, F. (2017). *Supermamme e superpapà. Il mestiere del genitore fra gli Usa e noi*. Milano: Metelmi Editore.

Palmieri, C. (2017). Una relazione materiale: i mediatori umani e non-umani nell'esperienza educativa. In Ferrante, A. & Orsenigo, J. (Eds.), *Dialoghi sul postumano. Pedagogia, filosofia e scienza*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis.

Pangrazio, L., Langton, K., Siibak, A. (2025). How the Family Makes Itself: The Platformization of Parenting in Early Childhood. In: Sefton-Green, J., Mannell, K.,

Erstad, O. (eds) *The Platformization of the Family*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T. & Tacchi, J. (2015). Digital ethnography. Principles and practice. Los Angeles (CA): Sage.

Qian, Y., & Hu, Y. (2024). The digitalization of family life: A multilevel conceptual framework. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 86*(5), 1160–1183.

Scheibling, C. (2020). "Real heroes care": How dad bloggers are reconstructing fatherhood and masculinities. *Men and Masculinities*, *23*(1), 3-19.

Smyth, L. (2012). The social politics of breastfeeding: Norms, situations and policy implications. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, *6*(2), 182-194.

Thomas, G. M., Lupton, D., & Pedersen, S. (2018). 'The appy for a happy pappy': expectant fatherhood and pregnancy apps. *Journal of Gender Studies, 27*(7), 759-770.

Tramma, S. (2009). *Che cos'è l'educazione informale*, Roma: Carocci.

van Vulpen, M., Heideveld-Gerritsen, M., van Dillen, J., Maatman, S. O., Ockhuijsen, H., & van den Hoogen, A. (2021). First-time fathers' experiences and needs during childbirth: A systematic review. *Midwifery*, *94*, 102921.

Virani, A., Duffett-Leger, L., & Letourneau, N. (2021). Parents' use of mobile applications in the first year of parenthood: a narrative review of the literature. *Health Technology*, *5*.

Vygotskij, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

White, C., & Jarvis, K. (2024). Men's experiences of the transition to fatherhood during the first postnatal year: A qualitative systematic review. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy, 87*(11), 661-672.

White, M. D. & Marsh, E. (2006). Content analysis: A flexible methodology. *Library trends*, *55*(1), 22-45.

WHO (2018). *WHO recommendations: intrapartum care for a positive childbirth experience*. Geneva: World Health Organization..