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From vernacularized commercialism to kidbait: toy review videos on YouTube and the problematics of the mash-up genre

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ABSTRACT

Children's entertainment has grown massively on YouTube in recent years, and the channels with the most subscriptions and views host content designed for children. This article investigates the toy review genre as present in YouTube videos targeting children. This topic has been discussed previously, most notably in regard to digital parenting and child infringement scandals. This analysis aims to more deeply understand the forms and functions of toy reviews in the contexts of YouTube's political economy, branding and commercialization, as well as regulation. We analyzed the narrative strategies of 180 videos across 35 toy review channels in order to gain an emic understanding of reviewing. Besides producing repetitive content characterized as "kidbait," these channels also employ creative aims and strategies to convince adults of the benefits of watching. Toy reviews are, however, a complex hybrid genre mediating children's commodities and play culture, and more attention should be dedicated to the ethical principles of their production.

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Introduction

Since its launch in 2005, YouTube has become a major video platform that allows ordinary users, "content creators," to upload videos to specific channels under a chosen username. The platform has over one billion users who watch hundreds of millions of hours of video content on YouTube every day, generating billions of views, more than half of which come from mobile devices (YouTube, 2019). Children are a large and growing audience because they start using YouTube at a very early age. For example, in Sweden, four out of five 2-year-olds use the internet, mostly for watching videos and mostly on a tablet, and their internet use has been consistently increasing (Davidsson & Thoresson, 2017).

Family is one of the most popular content categories on YouTube (Lange, 2014; Strangelove, 2010) and it saw immense growth in popularity during the 2010s. Toys, and other material artifacts, have continued to be central to children's play in the digital era. Among different genres with exposure of toys, reviewing of toys has recently gained

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popularity. In 2018, the highest earning content creator was the family behind the toy review channel *Ryan ToysReview*, with 22 million dollars in income (Rawlinson, 2018; Robehmet & Berg, 2018). Since 2017, the channel, with 18 million subscribers, has partnered with a Los Angeles-based start-up, Pocket.watch, for merchandise and marketing, including collectibles, merchandise, and a mobile application (“app”), *Tag with Ryan* (Pocket.watch, 2018). In the wake of Ryan’s success, toy reviewing has become an established way of communicating about new toys to an audience, and a number of toy (review) channels have emerged, such as *Fun Toys Collector Disney Toys Review* (11.5 million subscribers in January 2019), *Blu Toys Club Surprise* (7.2 million subscribers), and *Sandaroo Kids* (6.2 million subscribers). All these channels have far greater audiences than traditional children’s television programs.

This article discusses the “toy review” genre in YouTube videos and relates “toy reviewing” to the cultural economy that the mediation of commodities is embedded in. Mediation of new cultural products unfolds online through intermediaries who are conceived of as ordinary people and becomes legitimized by the accumulated attention they get through views, subscriptions, and algorithmic recommendations. Content that encounters such massive popularity should be taken seriously and included in discussions of children’s media content in order to better understand what constitutes it. Children’s online engagement and the mediation of new cultural products are important especially in an era where publicity accelerates and multiplies the consequences of single communicative actions online.

Research questions

This article focuses on reviews, in particular vernacular reviews, of which toy reviews constitute one particular subgroup, and is informed by two main research interests. First, given that reviewing toys has developed into a widespread phenomenon on YouTube, we want to understand what kinds of strategies and methods content creators apply when “reviewing” toys on their channels. Second, the fact that the primary audience of these videos are children implies that consequences are of high importance for media education policies, especially when considered alongside the fact that small children’s use of YouTube has been constantly increasing. Understanding what “reviewing” is all about requires conceptualization of the genre. We thus have formulated the following research questions:

- (1) How do popular online video channels constitute and apply the concept of “reviewing” and what are the most important genre characteristics of toy reviews on YouTube?
- (2) How can we in theoretical terms describe toy reviewing as a phenomenon of vernacular reviewing; what implications does targeting child audiences have?

Three central discussions provide useful contexts for understanding “toy reviewing”, namely, first, the condition of children’s *commercialized* culture, second, reviewing as part of *vernacularity*, and, third, the “exploitation genre” of *kidbait*. Reviewing of toys will be embedded in these contexts before proceeding to an analysis of YouTube toy review channels.

Children in commercialized online spaces

Marketing and advertising have increasingly infiltrated children's everyday lives: licensing-based merchandise and explicit promotion have not only become part of traditional mass media such as film and broadcasting, but also children's use of technology and new media has increased and children's play has been mediatized (see e.g., Hjarvard, 2004; Johansen, 2018). Advertisers and industry have discovered ways of directly targeting children instead of addressing them through adults (Hjarvard, 2004; Schor, 2004), and children's influence on purchasing choices in families, "kids-fluence", has increased (Schor, 2004). While persuasion and hidden advertisements targeting children are no new phenomenon (see e.g., Buckingham, 1995), the promotional dimension has become a more inseparable part of children's media cultures in an era of "content confusion" where boundaries between democratic and commercial communication have been blurred (Einstein, 2016). Simultaneously, commercial or promotional content has become naturalized and acceptable component in even those communication environments where younger people spend their time.

Children's consumer and commercialized cultures have been richly discussed in previous research, but mainly based on institutional media structures where the democratic and promotional cultures are clearly distinguished each other and regulated. Assessing child-focused content related to commercial or promotional cultures has to a great extent dealt with content from professional producers – for example, children's programs or advertisers – who work according to more or less shared standards and pre-defined categories (Buckingham, 1995, 2007; Lange, 2014; Schor, 2004; Seiter, 2005). There is still relatively little knowledge of how (con)fusion content manifests in channels that children are using and how young users are influenced by the mixing up of genres and production modalities. Studies have indicated that young people find it difficult to separate commercial from non-commercial content (e.g., Grimes, 2015; Seiter, 2005), supported by recent findings that young people have difficulties in determining digital news credibility (see e.g., Nygren & Guath, 2019).

In the past few years, as family accounts have become more popular in social media, featuring children's everyday life and cultural engagement, pre-teens, toddlers and even infants have more and more often become to public co-producers of content. Family accounts are driven by adults and motivated by performing maternity online and sharing parenting experiences, typically referred to as "sharenting", mommy blogging and family influencing (Abidin, 2017; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). As vernacular spaces become perpetuated by commercial interests of platform providers, marketers, and industry, the family content producers have become powerful mediators of commercial messages, or what Davis (2006) calls "promotional intermediaries" (Hunter, 2016). However, instead of emphasizing the character of branded entertainment as a word-of-mouth method of persuasion and means of monetization, prevalent in digital networks (Hudson & Hudson, 2006; Hunter, 2016; Wiedmann, Hennings, & Langner, 2010), the endorsing processes are often presented – not the least by the users themselves – as expressions of enthusiasm, related to creativity, fandom, amateurism, or everyday expertise, or as altruism and aspirations to help others by sharing this experience-based expertise (Edensor, Leslie, Millington, & Rantisi, 2009). Still, indeed, the inclusion of children in the cultural public online sphere may also be connected to listening to children's authentic voice and

promoting their participation, thus diversifying the variety of voices in cultural mediation (Oswell, 2013).

Vernacular reviewing

The review genre is a form of presentation in which an author creates and delivers an informed opinion about a cultural object to the public (Blank, 2007). Reviews are “public summaries and evaluations that assist readers to be more knowledgeable in their choice, understanding, or appreciation of products or performances,” (Blank, 2007, p. 7) and answer two questions: “what is it?” and “Is it any good?” Discussing criticism, which is considered a “higher” form of reaction than the review (Titchener, 1998), Orlik (2016, p. 8) defines the critical process as “knowledgeable comprehension, positive/negative ascertainment, and resulting carefully considered judgement as a means of reasonably estimating the value of the particular work under scrutiny.” While criticism is used to describe an expert’s evaluation of an event, a review is “a report with opinion”, characterized by a more “mundane” approach to the work and typically written for a wider audience by a generalist who qualifies as “an entertainment writer” (Titchener, 1998, p. 3).

In the pre-digital era, reviewing was limited to those reviewers and critics employed by media organizations. In early customer reviews that emerged alongside digital technologies, the “reviewer” was a layperson closely associated with the company that initiated the reviews, which never reached a very wide audience. Since the emergence of digital publishing, enabled by the internet and, later on, by social media, the review genre has opened up to basically anyone who is technically able to open an account with an online service. While the classical review has almost exclusively been based on adult-to-adult communication, vernacular reviews frequently include children as (co-)producers, and this alterity makes toy reviews a special case worth looking at.

Vernacularity has, in cultural theory, come to refer to non-institutional cultural forms and practices (Edensor et al., 2009; Howard, 2010). Vernacular discourses emerge “from discussions between self-identified smaller communities” within larger communities and have been conceptualized as an expression of alterity with regard to institutional power (Conti, 2013; Howard, 2010), which, in this case, are the professional criticism and review institutions. Being in a dialectical relationship with institutionalized forms of discourse, vernacular discourse emerges through the appropriation of dominant discourses to better suit the vernacular community (Conti, 2013; Howard, 2008). Emic definitions of social phenomena, i.e., definitions that significantly emerge from within and are regulated by a community, are needed in order to understand vernacularity. Reviewing, embedded in the ordinary, commonplace, mundane, or everyday practices, is part of “vernacular creativity” that Burgess (2006, p. 206) defines as “the process by which available cultural resources – are recombined in novel ways, so that they are both recognizable because of their familiar elements, and create affective impact through the innovative process of this recombination.” (see also Brownlie & Hewer, 2011) Vernacular creativity is thus “a productive articulation of consumer practices and knowledges – with older popular traditions and communicative practices” (Burgess, 2006, p. 207). Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, and Carter (2015) extend this notion of cultural participation and self-representation by introducing the concept of the “platform vernacular” to include the style, grammar and logical specificities that delimit modes of expression or action on the communication

platform. “Platform vernaculars” are “shared (but not static) conventions and grammars of communication, which emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users” (Gibbs, et al., 2015, p. 257).

Jenkins (2007) identifies in participatory culture the following characteristics: relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong mutual support and informal mentorship between users (that is a transfer of knowledge from the more experienced to newbies), and a feeling among the members that their contributions matter. Toy reviewing is part of such participatory culture and regarded as a type of vernacular reviewing, i.e., a subtype of user-generated content characterized as “cultural produsage” (Bruns, 2008) or “prosumption” (Toffler, 1980). Both of these neologisms refer to the hybridity of reception and production – the first from the words “production” and “usage,” the latter from “production” and “consumption,” – thus implying that groups of people that used to be at the “audience” end of the communication process or cycle of cultural production are now also active producers and mediators of content.

When examining review videos, it is relevant to note that YouTube is a multi-purpose platform that does not require or suggest that a particular genre, such as review, should be followed. Making judgements about commodities is, however, part of YouTube videos, which often mix and hybridize genres. Nicoll and Nansen (2018) analyzed the popular genre of unboxing, a type of review video wherein toys, and related products, are unpacked (see also Marsh, 2016). Indeed, reviewing is typically coupled with unpacking products and many creators describe their activities as “unboxing *and* reviewing.” Nicoll and Nansen (2018) found, in their content analysis of toy unboxing videos (based on multiple coding), that 11 percent of 47 adult-narrated videos (about 5 videos) and 15 percent of 53 child-narrated videos (about 8 videos) included assessment or reviewing. Reviewing is an embedded activity, often coupled with tutorials, tests, play-throughs, humor shows, relaxation videos, and the like. The fluidity of the category means that it is less appropriate to study such videos via quantitative means, for example, by conducting a content analysis. For this reason, and to better capture the quality of reviews, this study adopted a qualitative approach.

YouTube pays money for content creators based on the number of views and ad displays. In 2018, content creators eligible to apply for YouTube’s monetizing program were users with a minimum of 1,000 subscribers and at least 4,000 watch hours in the past 12 months (Google, 2019). Besides, income could be generated by selling one’s own merchandise, that is, using the YouTube channel for marketing, doing affiliate marketing (a brand or product pays the content creator a percentage of their sales when users buy their product), or making sponsored videos. In vernacularized commercialism of YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018), many vloggers typically identify “product reviews” as a good way of increasing income (see e.g., Ritvars, 2018). Because of ambiguity and non-transparency in producer roles related to these monetization methods, there is typically no validly identifiable separation in user-generated content between interest-invested and interest-free content.

Kidbait – children’s attention exploitation

As commercial content targeting children (e.g., Schor, 2004), exposure to targeted advertising and embedded marketing on social media has been identified as potentially

harmful to young people (Livingstone, 2013; Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2018). It is a practice that is accelerating due to the uncontrolled dynamics of user-generated content. Discussions around family-oriented videos, child-friendly content, and child safety on YouTube have been extensive, especially after Elsgate – a controversy related to the discovery of content inappropriate for children camouflaged as Disney characters. Elsgate, named after a character from Disney’s animated film *Frozen*, appeared on the *Toy Freaks* channel (2012–2017) and depicted members of the family that ran the channel (the father and his children) in disturbing situations. Since then, Google has adopted stricter guidelines regarding children’s content on its platform and developed an app for parents to monitor their children’s content consumption, YouTube Kids, which released in 2015 (for an analysis, see Burroughs, 2017). Discussions have centered around explicitly inappropriate content, such as violence, abuse, and sexual content, whereas the appropriateness of other, perhaps softer and more nuanced content qualities have remained beyond the scope of these public discussions, including the roles of mediated societal values, educational affordances of the content, and the line between communication and marketing.

User-generated content plays an ever-increasing role in children’s online video use. Nine out of 10 of the most subscribed-to child-oriented YouTube channels worldwide in January 2019 were user-generated (Statista, 2019). A mother and blogger illustratively described the typical way these channels are discovered and their appeal – the parental need for child-free time in order to take care of everyday tasks, as well as children’s recognition of and attraction to popular brands of media culture:

My son was obsessed with *Paw Patrol*. So, when I needed to take a shower or cook a meal, I’d go to YouTube on the iPad and find *Paw Patrol*-related videos for him to watch. He fell in love with the Kinder Surprise Egg videos, where some chick with long fingernails and a squeaky, condescending voice opens plastic eggs (sometimes covered in *Play-Doh*, which is gross and makes little sense to me), and reveals a *Paw Patrol* toy, a *Peppa Pig* winder, or something similar (Wisner, 2016, n.pag.; italics in original).

The mother concluded by calling the toy videos “toddler crack” and “plastic bullshit”: “These videos are basically like creepy commercials for toys, except for some god-forsaken reason, they are much more interesting and addictive to kids than actual commercials” (ibid.). Indeed, according to adult quality standards, the repetitive, attention-grabbing content does not seem to strive for quality. While content, the main purpose of which is to attract attention and make a viewer click on a hyperlink, is called “clickbait,” the attention-seeking video material that aims at exploiting young viewers’ media consumption patterns can be called “kidbait”. However, as “clickbait”, the term “kidbait” is slightly value-laden, referring to the speaker’s assessment of the content rather than to actual conditions, and it is sometimes questionable what is exploitation and what is not.

Toy (review) videos are not the only type of videos in the exploitation genre but they are powerful among their child audiences. Kidbait videos are a result of the algorithmic recommendation system employed by platforms like YouTube (Airoldi, Beraldo, & Gandini, 2016). The more attention – views and subscribers – a video receives, the more likely the video will be recommended to viewers. For a toddler audience, the recommendations that are displayed as still thumbnail images in the side menu play the most

significant role in the selection of video content. Thumbnails typically make use of strong colors, as well as identifiable merchandise and persons. Infants and toddlers, the majority of which is illiterate, cannot change their search strategies by entering new words into the search field but navigate only by selecting these algorithm-based recommendations shown on the screen. As long as toy videos are frequently watched content, it is probable that children end up watching the most popular videos if the video watching process is not intervened by an adult.

VanDeGraph (2016) discovered that toy videos on YouTube have a different viewing pattern than other videos. Usually, people watch shorter videos for longer than they do long videos; the total time watched is usually about half the video length. However, VanDeGraph found that toy videos were watched for the same amount of time on average, no matter how long the video was. For example, some of the videos are probably watched on autoplay and, as noted by VanDeGraph (2016), toy videos are also “English optional,” meaning that children are not hindered by language barriers in their binge-watching. These factors may partly contribute to the high viewing numbers that toy videos tend to attain.

Data and method

The collection of data was executed, with channels as a unit of analysis, by means of an automated script, that is a program written by a computer programmer to perform data retrieval according to a set of ordered operations. The script retrieved an initial sample from the 5,000 most subscribed-to channels that automatically noted video counts, views, likes, and dislikes. The script was released as open software on GitHub.¹ Data retrieval occurred from April 26–29, 2017 and collected 4,999 channels representing 6,697,639 videos, with an average of 1,340 videos per channel. The toy review sample was pulled from this larger dataset (for an analysis on the dataset, see Jaakkola, 2018) by manual coding (see below), to arrive at a limited sample consisting of 35 toy review channels including 29,037 individual videos.

The manual coding was applied in a two-stage process. First, review channels were separated from non-review channels with the help of “About” descriptions and examinations of the channel’s front page. This procedure limited the sample to 200 review channels. Second, remaining channels were coded according to the group of cultural objects the channel was mainly covering, such as toys, cosmetics, or games. A sample of 35 toy review channels was extracted. (For a more detailed methodological description of the sampling and data management process, see Jaakkola, 2018.)

Thereafter, the sample of 35 toy review channels was subjected to a two-stage qualitative analysis. First, each channel was analyzed in terms of its profile and channel characteristics, such as subscribers, views, likes, and dislikes, to get an overview of these types of channels in general. Channels provided only a very rough overview and many of the individual videos on the review channels fell beyond the category of reviews. This is why the unit of analysis was switched from channels to videos. Second, using videos as the unit of analysis, five videos from each channel were selected that best fit the definition of a review and that were listed as a “review” by the content producers themselves. This second stage of analysis was conducted, preferably, using in-built playlists that were specifically created for toy reviews by the content creators to contribute their accessibility.

A subset of 180 toy review videos from the 35 content producing channels were subjected to close-reading and analyzed with regard to the *actors* appearing in the videos (narrator) and the *activities* completed while conducting the review (method). In addition, the *rhetorical strategies* used by narrators when making an evaluation or an assessment were identified.

Analysis

Discovery of the child audience

Central dimensions of the toy review channels under study are presented in [Table 1](#). The channels had a relatively high number of subscriptions and a very high number of views on average. “Entertainment” was the most common self-designated category of the channels under review (N = 25, 71%). The average age of the channels at the point of the analysis was five years, with an average launch-date in 2013. Not surprisingly, the most viewed and subscribed-to channels were based in the United States (N = 22, 63%) and/or conducted in English (N = 30, 86%).

Many of the channels evolved from that of a toy collector into a toy review video channel, especially those focusing on Disney merchandise. Toy collectors are typically aficionados who collect artifacts of certain type as a hobby, and a great deal of merchandise are meant to be collectibles. A number of content creators embarked on producing videos by showing diecasts from Disney Pixar’s box office hit, *Cars*. Initially, they had an “adult” interest in collecting merchandise. For example, in 2010 *Blu Toys Club Surprise* presented a collection of 718 DVDs in an adult voice-over video, including film categories that were not specifically directed at a child audience. Later on, as audience interest grew, more family members were included in the production of the channel and the scope of content evolved from a focus on adult interests to something that is more directed at children.

Vloggers, too, often have similar beginnings. *Ryan ToysReview’s* first video, which was posted on 16 March 2015, was titled “Kid plays with toys Lego Duplo Number Train.” The video featured three-year-old Ryan picking up a package in a store, opening it at home, and building a “choo choo train.” As is typical in many of the review videos, Ryan’s mother asked him questions about the colors and numbers, serving as the dramaturge. Now that Ryan is seven years old, the videos have developed to include a more carefully designed set-up with an awareness of continuity, more sponsorship, and the early grey-toned thumbnails have become more colorful and carefully designed, reflecting a more general trend in toy videos.

The discovery of the child audience, the common denominator in all of these videos, prompted many of the channels to change names or launch affiliate channels featuring

Table 1. Averages of the review channels under study (N = 35).

	Total on average	Per video on average
Subscribers	2,409,410	4515
Views	2,419,066,089	3,606,394
Likes	3,391,412	5472
Dislikes	650,415	1279

different aspects of family life. The name changes illuminate the shift of strategies: for example, *DisneyCarToys* became *Sandaroo Kids*, *Awesome Disney Toys* became *AWESMR kids*, and *Brinquedos & Surpresas* became *Paulinho & Toquinho*. There has thus been a gradual transformation from toy presentation videos to play- and person-driven content by “family influencers” (Abidin, 2017). This has partly increased dialogue in production between channel-governing adults and their children, and contributed to an increased children’s participation in video production.

Creating a play stage

Toy review videos feature children, parents, and other family members as the protagonists, alternating between voice-overs (disembodied) and showing people in front of the camera (bodied). The videos are made by adults; even if children appear as presenters, the production process is controlled by an adult. The trajectories by which these channels have become toy review video producers varies. The three major modes of communication employed by channels include display videos, play videos and vlogs. *Display video channels* (N = 12, 34%) predominantly feature toy(s) by showing them in some way, for example, by unpacking, assembling, or just showing the toys one by one to the camera as the person(s) doing so remains in the background and provides voice-over commentary. *Play video channels* (N = 4, 11%) take toy exposure in a more active direction by developing a narrative and/or action with the toys and often show people interacting with the toys. *Vlog channels* (N = 19, 54%) focus more strongly on people and happenings and feature family members talking and doing things or feature events at home or in other environments, with toys serving a requisite role. Channels may combine different modes from video to video, or they may apply these modes in different categories but, typically, toy review channels seem to rely on these three content modes.

The majority of toy review videos are very repetitive, displaying the same strategies from one video to another, to the point that most of the soundtracks are composed by the same person (Kevin MacLeod) who has published his music online under an open license (incompetech.com). The same pattern adds to the recognizability of toy review videos both within and across channels. In addition, channel descriptions typically follow the same pattern: welcoming viewers to “kid- and family-friendly content,” often in two or three different languages, and providing a list of popular global brands to be “reviewed.”

The general pattern of expression being based on showing toys, the reviewing activity undertaken is often more dependent on the channel’s preferences and choices around genre and style than on any community-based consensus of what “toy reviewing” should imply. All the toy reviews in the sample do, however, feature a space for revealing and addressing toys and play. The videos are very operational, showing action instead of solely focusing on artifacts or people. Content is transferred into action and messages are mediated by *doing* something; for example, by trying out a new toy, opening a package, decorating a cake, or playing around with an artifact. In some videos, like those from the channel *ToysReviewToys*, the showcasing of toys is turned into a play in which toys “review” other toys. The videos, in other words, form a *play stage* that enables a wide variety of actions. To “review” something means to showcase it on the play stage and creating this space is the main aim of the toy review videos.

Actions performed on the play stage are patterned in a way that we might refer to as *activity categories*. Activity categories are motivational affordances implemented in the videos to create suspense, dramaturgy, and interest. They reflect YouTube's video genres and ways of expression in more general. Reviewing is typically attached to certain activity categories, such as "play *and* review" or "unboxing *and* reviewing." Sometimes reviewing is carried out by applying the YouTube-specific activity category and the actual reviewing mode thus stays in the background (Table 2).

The play stage is a scene for consumptive encounters that typically seem to occur *prima vista*; the presenters show their first impressions when encountering the product – they do not often exactly know what to expect when opening the package. Presenters are thus usually searching for instructions or assembling the toy in the beginning of a video, thereby involving the viewer in the process of familiarization, which becomes a shared moment of co-consumption. Indeed, the video presenters position themselves as fans, aficionados, enthusiasts, hobbyists, collectors, and consumers – not as connoisseurs or experts. They present themselves more as middlemen, a means of exposing toys and brands to their viewers, instead of constructing authority by showing, defining, or contextualizing what is being seen on the stage. Comments that presenters make about the toys they are "reviewing" are often spontaneously expressed personal preferences rather than prepared and informed critiques. For example, the "reviewer" may explain that she likes Mattel's Disney tractor more than Disney Story's tractor without providing any further explanation or revealing possible motivations (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdWfq2YOJdo>).

Brand names and visual appearances are recognizable and contribute to the appeal of the videos. Showing how toys work, what they really look like (beyond the meta-coverage of advertisements), and how they can be turned into a means of play is, of course, not necessarily contradictory to the traditional roles of institutionalized reviewers, such as the consumer adviser, teacher, judge, and primary producer's (artist's/industry's) advocate

Table 2. The major activity categories of the toy review videos.

Activity category	Description	Emic term
Opening packages	Unpacking and assembling new toys	Unboxing
Preparing surprises	Creating suspense by setting up a scene where something unforeseen unfolds	Giant egg surprises, blind bag surprises, science home experiments
Exposing collections	Showing collectibles such as toys, merchandise material, DVDs etc.	Collector's videos
Playing video games	Showing an entire play act on screen	Let's play's, play-throughs
Playing in physical environments	Spending time in and/or testing environments designed for play such as private or public playrooms, playgrounds, amusement parks etc.	Pretend plays, toy hunts, toy play reviews, location reviews
Showing how to do something	Making something by oneself and showing the making of it	DIY's, how-to's, tutorials
Parodizing	Making sketches or humorous stories with or about toys	Toy parodies, parodies with the specific brand name (such as Cars or Lightning McQueen parodies)
Vlogging	Talking about topics in front of the camera, showing occurrences and events	Vlogs, hauls, my days
Challenging and competing	In- or inter-video campaigns to compete in something	Challenges
Transformations	Applying makeup or trying out costumes	Makeovers

(Blank, 2007; Orlik, 2016). Seeing a toy in action may, in other words, either contribute to or restrict one's – including a child's – desire to buy the commodity. Besides, everything seen on screen is not necessarily related to (positive) purchasing choices but may stimulate one's fantasy, excite one's curiosity, raise interest in different topics, help learning new things, and so on. Still, toy reviews can be characterized by the lack of an attempt to explicitly create critical distance to the industry, or primary producers of the toys. Without this critical distance, communication becomes endorsement which, in the case of toy reviews, directly targets children.

In other words, what appears to be the most prevalent feature of online toy reviews is a lack of critique, especially when compared to what has traditionally been understood as a "review" in an institutionalized context. By assuming the mantle of fandom reviewers can endorse brands without reservations and normalizing their consumer conduct. The aim of review videos is not to enhance the consumers' tastes or preferences, or to improve the quality of the toy market in the way professional reviewers aspire to make aesthetic judgements regarding children's literature, thereby improving the quality and output of cultural content for children. Rather, to many "toy reviewers," reviewing products is almost synonymous with, simply, "making videos about toys." However, to some content creators "reviewing" toys is synonymous with making advertisements, a sort of "adreview" or "branded review" which, given that reviewing should imply the independence of the reviewer, is a bit of an oxymoron. Only a handful of videos in the sample indicated whether the toys were provided at no cost for review, even if they encouraged contacts from toy marketers on the channel description page. *Working with Lemons*, a channel for older children, was an exception. They indicated possible bias or influence via text that appeared at the beginning of the video: "This is an ad for Disney" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQqjoTDmS5Y>) or "Thanks Disney for sending this free Elena toy for review!" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xzb_VP4xndk). Sometimes, they added a hashtag (#ad) to the video description (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSluLfa6CP8>). Otherwise, very few toy reviewers revealed where the toys came from (whether they were provided at no cost or paid for), what the production context was, or where the toys would end up after the "review." Even if some channel owners mentioned something vague about this – for example, *Ryan ToysReview* claims to donate the toys to local communities or to charity – these details were not revealed alongside specific review videos.

Toy reviewing as a mash-up genre

Based on the previous analysis, "toy reviews" on YouTube can be regarded as a mash-up genre, making such reviews elusive when trying to assess them as objects of media literacy. According to Danesi (2015, p. 33), genres are identifiable by certain conventions that audiences come to recognize through regular exposure. A socio-culturally informed theory of genre would define it as a social action that is "an appropriate response to recurrent exigence" with "socially objectified and thus repeatable motives" to do something (Miller & Shepherd, 2009, p. 285). In this context, the patterned social action is valuable to the audience because it enables the identification and recognition of certain producer roles and regulates the viewer's interpretation of and relationship to the content.

Our analysis found that “toy reviews” make use of patterns and production forms from more than one genre, thereby drawing on more than one horizon of expectations by mixing up genre categories. This mash-up genre combines and blurs the lines between three major genres: *review*, *branded content*, and *entertainment*. In general, hybrid genres would not cause major trouble; many products of online culture are hybridized and combine, sample and mix categories to achieve the desired result. Ethical problems arise when different production modes related to a genre are crossed. The same problems arise in society when journalism and branded content are blended, such as in content marketing and, in particular, advertorials and advergames that cannot always be reliably decoded as representing one genre. In these cases, audiences are more often teenagers or adults, not infants and toddlers.

The production modes of the review, branded content, and entertainment are very different and, to a certain extent, even contradictory. A *review* implies a third-party assessment of products, conducted with independence and integrity to minimize the influence of the product producer. Reviewers are bound by ethical principles. *Branded content*, or advertising, constructs its production mode the other way around. Its content is defined by and bound to the commercial interests of the producer and mediator. Even if messages are increasingly embedded and disguised (Hudson & Hudson, 2006), there is an expectation that the context in which the content was created should be revealed. *Entertainment* implies rather harmless content created for enjoyment, even if it has deeply rooted historic connotations of pacifying audiences and being demoralizing (Harrington, 2019). “Toy review” videos are mixing up these three categories when a commodity is presented on the play stage (reviewed) as part of a commercial purpose to persuade (branded content) as well as divert the viewer (entertainment).

In addition, in “toy review” videos the production roles oscillate between the institutional, associated with professional production, and the vernacular, associated with lay, amateur, or bottom-up production. It would be tempting to generalize that producers of “toy reviews” are just ordinary people. However, given their massive publicity, which is not just limited to millions of subscribers (like in the case of *Ryan ToysReview*) but also reaches audiences through other platforms such as Instagram and legacy media, and because of their incomes and commercial partnerships, it would be naïve to describe the producers as mere amateurs. Even if the quality of the content seems amateur-like, the new online professional amateurs are often trying to mimic amateur authenticity (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018), which Abidin (2017) calls “calibrated amateurism.” By assessing the technical or aesthetic quality, it is thus impossible to assess on which institutional ground the producers are standing. This complexity related to the mash-up character of the genre, together with concealed production contexts, makes “toy reviews” difficult to position merely by watching the content.

Furthermore, as for their authorship, it has to be asked *whose* participatory culture the toy reviews are advancing. Toy review videos present an unconventional, incongruous category compared to similar genres that have child audiences, or to other review videos. Toddlers do not necessarily need or call for critical analysis with their toy endorsements, which means that the argumentation and assessment that play a central role in the review genre do not apply in the same way for toddlers as they do for school-aged children who can evaluate and balance arguments. In literature criticism, review of children’s literature, including infants’ literature, is typically conducted by an adult reviewer writing for an

adult audience with the goal of establishing standards for quality children's books. Toy review videos, however, are not primarily produced in order to advise parents on how to select toys for their children or to assess product quality. Like children's television programs, toy reviews are produced by adults with the intent of informing, entertaining, and educating child audiences. As often, children's preferences may radically differ from the adults' (Buckingham, 1995; Schor, 2004).

The (adult) video producers are promotional intermediaries doing marketing for the brands they are "reviewing"; at the same time, these intermediaries exploit the (child) audiences' views for creating income. In this constellation, the value of the toys are not highlighted by elucidating and explaining it, but the value lies in the co-consuming moment of watching toys in action in the play stage that is created. To convince parents of the good intents behind the video production, or of the benefits of watching the content, the videos largely deploy some rhetorical strategies primarily targeting adults (parents), attempting to highlight the usefulness of the videos. For example, by highlighting the educative assets of a video that help children learning colors, numbers, or "how-to's" (how make something by yourself), educators may be more willing to let children watch these types of videos. Or, besides "reviewing" the toys, the toy review videos allege to narrate plays with the help of the toys and thus aim at nurturing imagination and fantasy. These parent-convincing strategies are part of strategies counteracting the pure commercialism assumptions and kidbait intentions of the videos, trying to negotiate between more useful purposes and purposes typically seen as less useful, such as the production mode of branded content (exposure to commercial content) and entertainment (diversion and enjoyment).

Discussion

The online toy reviewing culture has emerged gradually on YouTube since the early 2000s. It is now widespread and connected to other forms of play and action. Even though U.S. dominance was found in the sample, which was based on the popularity and global reach of videos, local scenes with similar profiles and agendas have emerged during the second decade of the 21st century. For example, there were similar toy (review) channels active in the Nordic countries at the beginning of 2019: *Family Playlab* (3.6 million subscribers in February 2019, launched in 2006) and *Lek med oss* in Sweden (88,993 subscribers, launched in 2017); *Henrik & Andrea* (115,119 subscribers, launched in 2015) and *aBABYc ToysReview* (81,417 subscribers, launched in 2015) in Norway; and *WooBooTV* in Finland (37,324 subscribers, launched in 2011). These channels deliver content in their national languages, combining descriptions of toys with English to reach a more global audience, and some of the producers ranked high on the national list of earnings (Karlsten, 2017).

There is thus no denying that the online toy review business can be financially lucrative. The blurred lines between styles and modes of expression are, however, far less problematic than if production modes – in the case of toy reviews, the disinterested or democratic, and the interest-invested or commercial – are blurred. In vernacular online cultures, in which communicators are forced to seek solutions for making profit by themselves and not leave it to an employer or commissioner, these lines have become increasingly harder to maintain. Nevertheless, the fact that the word "review" is borrowed

from a disinterested intellectual sphere and used for influencing and marketing purposes strongly undermines the original meaning of reviewing as a critical and independent examination, assessment, and evaluation of something. This conceptual transformation contributes to the emergence of the “promotional review”, which seems as an oxymoron in the classical framework of reviewing. Alternatively, “toy reviews” could perhaps more appropriately be called “revues,” – a productive misinterpretation of the original word “revue,” meaning a theatrical production consisting of brief, loosely connected, often satirical skits, songs, or dances. As humorous pieces with the purpose of providing an overview or an entertainingly packaged look at a cultural object, such “revues” use reviewing as a way of communicating emotions and experiences, rather than trying to persuade their audience by delivering an informed opinion. “Revueing” means celebrating the joy of consumption.

One of scholars who pointed out these problems already more than a decade ago is Henry Jenkins (2007), who identified challenges in how immediate experiences are transferred into sets of rules and more general guidelines. According to him, there is a “transparency problem” because children are typically not actively reflecting on their media experiences and cannot articulate what they learn from the participation. There is also an “ethics challenge”, as children cannot on their own develop the ethical norms needed to cope with the complex and diverse social environment online. Educators are thus particularly important in supporting digital cultural citizenship among young children. The hybridity of the content and the mash-up character of the genre, described above, makes it difficult even for adults to establish standards for assessing the quality of toy review video content. Sharpening the definitions of different types of content matters especially in toy reviews, which now seem to blur the lines between disinterested and commercially interested categories.

One solution for enhanced parent support would be to produce reviews on reviews. Independent third-party reviews of YouTube channels, produced as guidelines for parents interested in monitoring their children’s media diets, are an example of an attempt to establish quality assessments for online content. For example, the U.S.-based non-profit online platform Common Sense Media publishes adult-focused and child-focused reviews of YouTube channels (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/youtube-reviews>). Both adults and children can assess a channel’s content across different categories by rating it, for example in terms of a channel’s “consumerism,” and by leaving written commentary. The comments concerning toy review channels demonstrate that parents typically feel helpless with regard to the content presented on these platforms. However, toy review channels have, again, received very dismissive, demoralized, and condemning comments from adult commentators (N = 77, on 2 February 2019), assigning the channels “a zero value for kids” and calling them “garbage” (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/youtube-reviews/ryan-toys-review/user-reviews/adult>).

Still, it seems that more transparency is needed from the content creators to make clear in which contexts messages are produced, together with regulation that at the policy level forces vernacular producers to a more ethical and accountable direction. In addition, a more solid incorporation of commercialism and consumerism in discourses of media literacy are needed, not in the way cultural industries traditionally have been dismissed (see e.g., Buckingham, 1995), which may reinforce misbelief and distrust among parents rather than help them further, but addressing the complexities of producer roles, genres and production

contexts so that they can be better dissected and analyzed in situated communication. Understandings of how vernacularized commercialism works may thus support families in resisting consumerism and transferring discouraged reactions into something more transformative.

Conclusion

This article has described the popular category of toy reviews on YouTube with the goal of finding out what vernacular the popular genre employs in its content and communication strategies. As “branded produsage” or “branded prosumption,” toy review videos are an extreme type of vernacular reviewing. A qualitative analysis showed that toy review channels use “reviewing” as a strategy to expose toys and other playful consumer products to their audiences, often embedded in other online strategies of play and entertainment. Even if motivated by educational, narrative, or dramaturgical factors, such intent is strongly intermingled with marketing and influencing, reinforcing popular brands. The lay, professional, or (semi-)professional content producers more or less consciously become promotional intermediaries who are only voluntarily bound by any ethical rules of conduct concerning their sponsorship and production principles.

The findings of this study prompt adults’ educational interventions. Guardians and other adult gatekeepers of child viewers, however, need support and tools for developing literacy for online genres. Toy reviewing also involves a great deal of potential for addressing toys, play, and children’s worlds in a way that supports children’s voices and agency. Enhancing support for child agency across all three categories of media literacy (content reception, produsage/prosumption, and production) is a 21st-century objective for media and information literacy actors.

Note

1. The script YouTubeStats was written by Pasi Luostarinen (BeTeK) and released at <https://github.com/BeTeK/YoutubeStats>.

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