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Child Influencers in the Creator Economy – The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Research-in-progress

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Abstract

Social media influencers play a well-established social media role in modern society. YouTube is one of the most popular social media platforms for video content creation and vlogging has become a favourite activity among young children. This trend has created many YouTube channels targeting young children as their audience. Many YouTube channels that target kids have children leading them (called child influencers), often managed by parents. Influencer marketing has created the notion of the creator economy, which relates to content creation in social media with an ability to monetize. This research-in-progress paper presents an exploratory research agenda to investigate the notion of child influencers in the creator economy, alluding to the issues of morals, privacy, vulnerability and exploitation.

Keywords child YouTubers, social media influencers, YouTubers, child influencers, creator economy

1 Introduction

In the contemporary world where social media has changed many aspects of everyday life, a new role of “social media influencers”, also known as online influencers, digital creators or content creators is gaining momentum. The term “influencers” is used to identify those “who [have] built a network of followers and [are] identified as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches” (De Veirman et al. 2017, p. 798). Backaler (2018) identifies three types of influencers: (i) celebrity influencers (popular stars, sportspeople, government officials etc.), (ii) category influencers (those who have a selected speciality expressed through the content they create, e.g., food or travel, and have a good number of followers), and (iii) micro-influencers (who are enthusiastic and share knowledge about things they are passionate about, but may not have a large number of followers or a special category/topic they influence about). Unlike celebrity influencers, category and micro-influencers create content in order to reach more followers and build a community through their social media platforms. These influencers may be using one or a variety of social media platforms. There are several types of social media platform that facilitate this notion of influencer marketing such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok. Whilst building a community, influencers are able to communicate, capture and affect the behaviours and attitudes of their community/followers. This influence on other people through social media has created the notion of the creator economy, where content creators earn money directly through their audience and their engagement with the content, thus referring to the notion of a social media facilitated economy enacted through content creators/influencers on social media platforms.

In recent years, children are increasingly seen to be using social media (Folkvord et al. 2019). According to Folkvord et al. (2019), among the available social media platforms, YouTube is the most preferred platform for many young children as a source of entertainment. According to past surveys 80% of children aged 0-7 (Neumann and Herodotou 2020), 73% aged 8 - 11 and 87% aged 12-15 years watch videos on YouTube (Ofcom 2019). These facts suggest that the majority of children in the present context prefer to watch the content on YouTube rather than watching TV programs (Ofcom 2019). Therefore, YouTube channels targeting young kids are increasingly becoming popular. YouTube channels targeting kids include cartoons, nursery rhymes, child-friendly characters, child influencers and so forth. The focus of this research is the notion of child influencers and therefore the channels that have young children (sometimes even younger than 5 years) leading (or “starring” in) these channels, who are identified as child influencers. A primiparity literature review suggested that there is only limited literature on the topic of child influencers and shows a need for further work in this context.

Child influencers in YouTube create various types of content such as videos of daily lives (referred to as video blogs or vlogs), pranks, unboxing (opening boxed products/toys) videos, playing video games, product reviews and talents. Vlogging, which is user-generated video content, has become extremely popular in the past few years (Hovden 2013). For vlogs on YouTube, the audience can view the created videos and subscribe to the channel of the YouTuber which then gives them access to more content from the YouTuber and they will be notified when new videos are available on the channel. In the context of the creator economy, influencer marketing through YouTube is referred to as sponsored content, native content and vlog advertising (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2019). Businesses are increasingly using influencer marketing as a means of advertising their products or services, which leads to blurring of the boundaries between non-advertising and advertising content. Research has argued that children’s cognitive abilities, emotion regulation and moral development are still developing when they are under 12 years of age (Hudders et al. 2017). Therefore, children are a vulnerable group in the social media context, both as influencers and viewers. Scholars have studied influencer marketing on Instagram among student and adult participants and the effects on advertising literacy of young adolescents (De Veirman et al. 2017) and found that the effectiveness of influencers in terms of a particular product or brand will depend not only on the number of followers but also the quality and style of the content. Van Reijmersdal and Van Dam (2020) identified the effects of influencer marketing disclosures among children YouTubers and indicated that would help to empower children’s understanding of the commercial content of the video. Further, their study explored how this disclosure increases the levels of advertising literacy which comprises ad recognition, understanding of selling intent, and understanding of persuasive intent (Van Reijmersdal and van Dam 2020). Some other studies have highlighted negative consequences for children from the use of YouTube advertising (Folkvord et al. 2019). However, further studies are needed to understand the phenomenon of child influencers.

This research-in-progress paper presents findings from a preliminary literature review and sets out to develop a research agenda to explore the existing theoretical and empirical work on child influencers targeting children across various disciplines. The paper is structured as follows. Section two further discusses child influencers, drawing on several examples from YouTube. Section three briefly explains the context of the creator economy, followed by section four, which discusses child influencers’ role in

the creator economy, highlighting the problems and issues. The final section is the conclusion that discusses the future direction of this study including the proposed research agenda.

2 Child Influencers

Children around the world are increasingly choosing screens, and watching videos, as their main form of entertainment. Media sharing platforms such as YouTube and TikTok are the most popular social media platforms among young children. In all these platforms child influencers, while often managed and produced by their parents, play the main role in the content created for this channel. It is fair to say these children are “starring” in their channels. There are many famous child influencers seen on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and so forth. In this research our focus lies on child influencers on YouTube. Child influencers on YouTube (aka child YouTubers), are young child personalities on YouTube who have a large reach and are seen as likeable by their viewers (Neumann and Herodotou 2020).

One very popular child YouTube channel is Ryan’s World. Ryan Kaji is an eight year old boy who amassed 19 million viewers in 2019 just by playing with his toys (De Veirman et al. 2019). Ryan’s World 1 was the 6th most watched YouTube site for children (Clement 2019), and has over 28 million subscribers. Another example is Gaby and Alex, a brother and sister, both under 5 years of age when the channel became a favourite with children around the world. Similar to Ryan, they play with toys, and produce content on their day-to-day activities, and currently have over 17 million subscribers.

Leon and Ames (2021) examined the economic role of children in a digital world by conducting an exploratory study (Leon and Ames 2021). Five young female YouTubers in Peru, who were from 8 to 11 years old, were selected for the study, along with 40 videos created by them. The selected videos had a review format such as unboxing (opening a box and commenting on the product inside the box), a haul (showing products recently purchased and commenting about where to purchase them or promote commercial products and brands). The results were analysed by exploring young YouTubers as producers, as distributors and as consumers in the economy in relation to research questions. However, the study did not connect with YouTubers virtually or physically; they only focus on video content to analyse economic and social impact. Their main conclusion was that child YouTubers make a contribution to the economy as well as increase their socio-economic relationship with the wider community other than their parents, neighbourhood and peers. The study highlighted that there was a display of social status by the young YouTubers examined, and concluded that in a country with marked social inequality these young influencers felt compelled to state their social status as a part of their identity (Leon and Ames 2021).

Another study explored the nature of children’s parasocial relationships and wishful identification with their favourite YouTube personalities by using a quantitative research method (Tolbert and Drogos 2019). This para social relationship and wishful identification are different but interrelated psychological concepts. The study analysed these two notions in terms of gender socialization theory. A 5-item Likert scale was used and the survey administered to a group of children at one time (Tolbert and Drogos 2019). The sample consisted of 161 children aged between 9 and 12 years who resided in a metropolitan area in the southern United States.

Several studies have explored the impact of child YouTubers in advertising unhealthy food which leads to child obesity and a series of health issues. Castelló-Martínez and Tur-Viñes (2020) conducted a study to explore the content of videos posted by child YouTubers and their impact on the issue of obesity in Spain. This is an explorative qualitative-quantitative study conducted by means of content analysis. 304 videos posted by child YouTubers were selected to categorize the marketing style: prevalence of ultra-processed food vs. healthy food products. The study emphasizes the necessity of implementing proper advertising warnings on the content of videos as children are a highly vulnerable group (Tur-Viñes et al. 2022). Another study investigated the exposure to influencer marketing of food and beverages which are high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) and the trend of increasing children’s immediate intake of HFSS (Coates et al. 2020b). This study used a qualitative focus group method and thematic analysis to explore children’s understanding and attitude about this marketing behaviour. The sample comprised 24 children aged 10-11 years. This research identified that children are able to resist HFSS products marketed by child YouTubers, but current regulations are not adequate in protecting children (Coates et al. 2020b). Thus, the lead researcher suggested that there should be a combined effort between policymakers, social media platforms, advertising agencies, brands and influencers (Coates, 2020).

According to the literature found above, child YouTubers are considered as an integral part of advertising. Importantly, the commercial content is highly integrated with vlog content, making it

difficult for children to identify it as advertising. Consequently, children are a highly vulnerable group in the influencer marketing context.

3 The Creator Economy

Since the early 2000s with the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies and social media platforms, user-generated content (UGC) has gained considerable attention and interest from businesses as well as consumers. From businesses' point of view, user-generated content has real marketing value. Consumers also see content created by other consumers more favourably and it has a higher impact on influencing their purchasing decisions. This concept of UGC in social media has developed further over the years and has created this new role of "influencers". These are people who create content about something they are passionate about, expressing their views and experiences through content creation. Content creation by consumers for consumers has created the notion of the creator economy (El Sanyoura and Anderson 2022). It is believed to give people (influencers) a chance to specialize in their passion. They create content on what they are passionate about. For example, those who are passionate about travelling can make videos about it, or those who are enthusiastic about video games can play video games at home, record them, and upload them as content, or create content about video games, and so on.

The creator economy, also known as the 'attention economy' by researchers, highlights that in exchange for content creators' content, followers offer their own attention. This 'attention' is measurable and easily translatable into metrics of value such as the number of subscribers (on YouTube) which can be directly monetized (Berryman and Kavka 2018). Remember the popular 90's TV show, America's Funniest Home Videos? It showed many videos featuring kids in each of its episodes. It is fair to say this trend has transferred to social media and parents (or other close relatives) who are comfortable recording have started documenting their kid's day-to-day life. It was not long before they realized that they can make a living by uploading those videos on social media.

In the past, companies used celebrities as a marketing strategy (Knoll et al. 2017). This is because celebrities are able to influence a large number of fans. This notion has now transferred to influencers as social media allows the above-mentioned quantifiable measures and influencers are able to portray their follower base. Such measures and the ability to create a community around them through content creation are the drivers of the creator economy (El Sanyoura and Anderson 2022). Social media platforms allow various opportunities for content creators to earn. YouTubers for example can earn through advertising, roughly an average of 0.18 USD per view for an advertisement; however they need to have at least 1000 subscribers, and 4000 hours of watched content to be able to enter into the YouTube Partner program that allows advertising and earning through the videos. Similar to other influencers, child influencers are also seen to be engaging in advertising or reviewing products.

While traditional economic and sociological theories of consumption do not discuss the role of children in the economic world, researchers such as Zelizer (2002) explain how children can actively participate in economic activities through value creation. As explained by Leon and Ames (2021) this perspective can be used to investigate children as influencers in the context of the creator economy.

4 The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

This section further discusses the findings of our preliminary review, explaining the good – favourable outcomes, the bad – the issues of the notion of child influencers in the creator economy, and the ugly – the dangerous side of things, possibly calling for more research, regulations, and strict governance for using child influencers in social media.

The Good – Social media platforms have enabled a new medium of entertainment for children around the world. With child YouTubers, it has created young entrepreneurs with a platform through which they can earn at a very young age. Leon (2018) study found that Peruvian child YouTubers improve their technical, social and critical skills in content production during the process. The child influencers learn how to edit the software, how to build loyalty with the target audience and live within the contemporary collaborative culture (Leon 2018). In addition, investigating young female influencers in the Brazilian context, Marôpo et al. (2017) highlighted that content creation and engagement with social media communities positively affect identity, as they see themselves as social agents.

The Bad – There is some research that has been done to explore whether there is a relationship between child YouTubers and unhealthy dietary patterns. Taking a theory of persuasion lens, it is possible to highlight that platforms such as YouTube can often mislead children (as they lack judgement) and make

an impact on their final intention (Tur-Viñes 2018). Children below the age of 13 will find it difficult to distinguish the advertising and non-advertising content (Panic, Cauberghe et al. 2013). Moreover, children consider the vloggers as role models and believe them more than their parents and/or peers at times. Therefore, they are often susceptible while using YouTube.

Martinez et al. (2021) conducted a content analysis with 450 videos of child influencers in the United States, the United Kingdom and Spain. According to their analysis, 71% of those videos involved unhealthy and non-essential food items (Martínez-Pastor et al. 2021). Coates et al. (2020) conducted a focus group study to explore how YouTuber vlogging content affects children 10 and 11 years old and found that the majority of them have encountered YouTubers' content with exposure to unhealthy food high in fat, salt, and sugar (Coates et al. 2020a). Other studies have also found that there is an increasing trend of unhealthy food and beverage intake by children who have had exposure to YouTube influencers (Castelló-Martínez and Tur-Viñes 2020; Smit et al. 2019). These suggest the need for a focused approach to manage content creation by YouTube influencers to avoid unhealthy food promotion.

The Ugly

Child social media influencers have become a source of income for families with monetizing of influencer marketing and there is a risk of exploitation of these young children. Parents are trying to make their child a star to and gain an income. Child influencers should enjoy their videos, but McGinnis (2022) argued most of the kid influencers are working when producing online content because they need to bring income to their family (McGinnis 2022). They can be exploited in different ways by themselves, by their parents and by advertisers. Child influencers are exploited in several areas such as missing school and sport activities, losing the time for socializing as normal children and suffering psychological harm.

Another important issue noted in the literature is the vlogging of children's lives online and the impact it may have on them as they grow (Nottingham 2019). While the current legislation does not prioritize children's right to privacy, and allows parents to share content about children's lives freely, child privacy issues should not be completely avoided, and need to be further looked at (Riggio 2020; Talukdar 2020). Leaver and Abidin (2018) pointed out that some child influencers have made TV appearances, and criticize that these children who already have a massive follower base on social media may have been used by TV show hosts to increase their ratings. As more and more children are featured online as influencers and at times being highlighted by traditional media like television, it needs to be carefully monitored as it can have negative implications for a child's emotional development as well as privacy and needs to be further discussed.

5 Conclusion

This research-in-progress paper portrays an important topic that has been the focus of limited discussions in the literature, and nearly non-existent in the IS literature – child influencers in the creator economy. The paper draws on past research to highlight the good, the bad and the ugly of the emerging notion of child influencers in modern times dominated by social media. While we observed several favourable characteristics of the role of child influencers in the creator economy, perhaps the most important to highlight is that while that these kids make millions, they are still kids and are vulnerable. Therefore there have been calls for strict regulations to ensure their safety, desirable working environments and protection of their earnings (McGinnis 2022).

This paper outlines the research framing the role of child influencers in the creator economy. The authors propose the following research agenda to carry out an investigation of child influencers. The proposed phases will further explore the problems highlighted in this research-in-progress paper.

Phase I will comprise a thorough systematic literature review to identify all important aspects of child influencers in the context of the creator economy. This investigation will look into all existing work on child influencers (with a specific interest in work done in an IS context). The research question to be addressed in Phase 1 is *“what do we know so far about child influencers?”* **Phase 2** is proposed as qualitative research to collect empirical data investigating perceptions and experiences of parents of young kids to understand how families perceive these child YouTubers, and identify the benefits and issues of child influencers and the role of social media platforms in facilitating them. This phase will aim to understand the role of social media platforms in facilitating the role of child influencers through the theory of sociotechnical representations (Weerasinghe et al. 2022), a novel theory based on sociotechnical perspectives in information systems (IS) research that acknowledges varying representations of IS phenomena. The research questions to be addressed in this phase are: RQ1: *“how do families perceive the role of child influencers?”*, and RQ2: *“what are the perceived benefits and*

issues of having child influencers?" In **Phase 3** we aim to take a case study approach, by investigating selected child influencers as cases, examining their YouTube content, and analysing comments on their most watched videos. At this phase the research objective is to understand the experience of child influencers themselves. Identification of child influencer cases, the platforms to study, the issues to investigate will be identified as a result of phase 1 and phase 2. The research questions will be developed based on those findings. The possibility of conducting interviews with parents/managers of child influencer personalities will be explored as it will be beneficial to form a rich case. In this phase, especially through the analysis of social media content (comments and other measures) we aim to understand how child influencers are represented in social media platforms.

Surprisingly, the topic of child influencers is extremely underrepresented in top IS journals and almost absent in IS literature. The notion of the creator economy facilitated by social media is an important IS topic. Looking at the context of child influencers in the creator economy through an IS lens is important and allows IS researchers to address issues in technology platforms that are exploited when vulnerable groups such as children are presented with opportunities to use technology. We believe that this is an important and necessary starting point.

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