Kidfluencing: The Mental Impacts of Posting on Social Media can have on Children and Parents

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Impacts on Children

As the zeitgeist of the internet continues to evolve, children are continuing to carve themselves a place in it. According to a study completed in 2010, more than 90% of two year olds in the United States already have an online presence (Masterson, 2020). As kid's content grows, so does its potential for monetization. This has perpetuated a niche of 'Child Influencers'. Child influencers are children who star in content ranging from reviews, vlogs, or skits for an audience (composed primarily of other children) on a social media platform. In addition to kid influencers, another genre of family content has been created, named 'sharenting'. Sharenting is when a parent shares images, stories, and even tips regarding their family on public social media platforms. These industries have reached significant heights as advertisers take notice of the children's influence, and have created brand deals with them (Maheshwari, 2019). Due to these trends, an increasing number of families are trying to enter, and profit in this industry. However; there are some potential harms involved for the children such as the risk of financial exploitation, pressure, stress, issues forming strong self-concept, and various other concerns to mental well-being.

Regarding the previous paragraph, it is important to note how monetized these children's channels can become. The Guardian notes that in 2020, popular child influencer 'Ryan'sWorld', made approximately thirty million in a year. It is reasonable to assume that once a child reaches a significant monthly income from their social media career (For example hundred thousand, even a million) they become the primary source of income for their household. This has the potential to lead to financial exploitation. When a child is spending most of their time working,

and producing videos they start to miss out on key elements of their childhoods such as proper socialization with other children their age, education, and the ability to garner a sense of independence. McGinnis (2020) points out, "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.”.

Being a primary source of income also comes with other issues such as the concern of increased pressure child influencers have. They are required to cope with several, interconnected sources of pressure. They have to meet the audience's expectations by producing the content they want to see, and react the way they’re expected to react. McGrath (2023) explains, “Influencers become famous primarily for their actions on YouTube and various social media sites, meaning they often spend even longer on these sites than the average person. There is also an increased pressure on these influencers to maintain the content people want to see”. They face pressure from their parents to perform, and do well for social media in order to continue bringing in income. Lastly, they face pressure from their advertisers to have their videos perform well so they can garner in new consumers, and revenue. Most young children do not have the proper coping mechanisms to deal with this amount of stress, so dealing with this might have toxic effects on their health later in life. According to an article from Harvard’s Developing Child division (2022) , struggling with prolonged, and severe stress in childhood has the potential to have mental, and physical consequences later in life such as mental delays, heart disease, diabetes, substance abuse, and depression.

The concerns of mental illness often arise regarding the topic of kid influencers. The children often face increased risks of depression, anxiety due to their work environment being

heavily unregulated (Permanasari, 2021). Children often do not know how to regulate their emotions, because they have never been taught. Therefore, if they are experiencing high amounts of pressure, stress, and anxiety, it can lead to an increased frequency of meltdowns, or the child learns to internalize the issues while they start to build up. Internalization of issues can lead to issues such as depression, fatigue, insomnia, or even excessive thoughts of worthlessness or guilt (Liu, et al., 2011). Alternatively; the child might start having chronic meltdowns as a result of the inability to manage distress, and might have issues self regulating their emotions as they grow older (Miller, 2023). “Additionally, child influencers are more likely to have anxiety, depression, and substance issues as they grow older because their sense of self-esteem is linked to things like public approval and they do not yet have the coping skills to handle failure and disappointment.”(Edwards, 2023).

Social approval is a normal thing for children to want as they continue to form their identity. Child influencers also have this desire, but as seen previously might not have the appropriate coping skills to healthily regulate it.. As a child grows, they start to learn how to build confidence in themselves without the constant approval of other people. However, with child influencers, their entire career is based on people’s perceptions of them. When more people like them, and enjoy what they produce, their career is more successful, and additionally they get more approval from their sponsors, and parents. This creates a hazardous, direct association between social praise, and success. Aforementioned, Edwards pointed out the linking of self-esteem to public approval, and the unrefined coping skills. One of the aspects that can make this dangerous is the fact that a noticeable portion of what makes a video successful is the algorithm, and if a video does not do well the child cannot understand that. Instead they might take it as a personal attack on their character, or efforts.

Children's influencers might also have issues regarding self-concept, and autonomy. Between the ages of one, and three, children are starting to develop, and expand their cognitive, and motor skills. They want to know how they fit in their environment, and how they can impact it. They're desperate to control the world around them. (Rymarowicz, 2015). Child influencers cannot define, and express their independence when they are being told what type of content to produce, what toys to play with, what to say, and what times they work by parents, and advertisers. In addition, the lack of distinction between work environment, and personal environment might have some implications on the child's identity. Children normally split into two identities, a personal identity, and a social identity (Esquivel et al., 2023). A personal identity is how a child knows they are unique, and differ from other people, and a social identity is how they fit into a group. Influencer children might have a harder time forming a social identity. Older influencers are required to craft their identity in a manner that resonates with an audience as well as market themselves as a personal brand, defined as "impression management" (Vear, 2020). Children influencers can also form these two identities, their authentic selves, and their online personas. Psychologist Donna Rockwell explains, "many stars feel a sudden crush of 'isolation, mistrust, and lack of personal privacy . . . the person develops a kind of character splitting between the 'celebrity self' and the 'authentic self.". Their self-concept is still forming so these two identities have the potential to become muddled, and confused. (McGrath 2023).

This phenomenon of child entertainers has been occurring for decades, and even centuries. Child actors played a distinct role in the history of film, and media. However; the child acting industry has been plagued with cases of exploitation, and damaged mental well-being of child stars. One of the most infamous cases of this was Jackie Coogan, an actor in the early

1900s, who starred in many film productions when he was only a child. He built a large fortune from his work, and had it safeguarded by his father. However; after an accident that killed Jackie Coogan's father, his mother, and stepfather gained access to it. With his money they spent it on frivolous purchases, causing Coogan to take them to court. After the court case, a new law was created called 'The Coogan Law', which held parents of child stars to put the money they earn into a trust fund for them to access when they are eighteen (Cooper, 2023). Recently there has been a movement to extend the Coogan law to child influencers. This is extremely important since child influencers have less regulations, and safety nets to ensure that they work in a healthy environment free from financial exploitation, and emotional harm.

Impacts on Parents

Parents have also carved themselves a distinct place in the digital atmosphere. There are countless blogs produced by parents that center around their children, and their experiences as a parent. Research has indicated that 75% of parents that are active on social media share pictures, videos, and status updates on their children monthly (Walrave, et al., 2022). Many parenting blogs extend this by posting content related to their children weekly, or even daily. Over the recent years this field has gained controversy, as concerns are raised about the impact it has on the children (Explored in previous section, where the child was the primary focus in content). This section focuses on content that has the parents as the subject, discussing their motives as well as the mental impact social media has on them.

Parents can gravitate towards social media for many reasons. Parents consume the content of other parents in order to seek advice, or to simply feel less alone. 67% of parents rate social media as useful for finding advice, and 62% find it useful for helping them reduce their anxieties (University of Michigan, 2022). Parents who produce content can be motivated by profit incentives, constructing a digital community, or see it as a way to generate social validation.

Social media has been distinguished as a means to build profit, and even an entire career (especially regarding social influencing). Parenting influencers are able to create revenue through child-centric posts, and brand deals (O'Neill, 2019). Having this stream of revenue can be critical for parents, and their kids. Digital content creators who have a child who is chronically ill are able to help bring in financial support in order to pay for hospital bills, and help their child live. (Steinberg, 2017). Even in situations where the child is healthy, having the money can help them with school, extracurriculars, and improve their life overall. However; there's concerns with this motive, for it has the potential to lead into financial exploitation of the child (as seen in the previous section).

Parents who build a social media page are able to find, and give emotional/financial support as they build their virtual community. 72% of parents feel that social media is beneficial to make them feel as if they are less alone (University of Michigan, 2015). Having this community to fall back on can make parents feel like they are more secure, and comfortable with parenting. This concept can be similar to parenting groups in the real world. Though one is on a larger scale, they make parents feel like they have emotional support, have access to

valuable resources, and allow them a place to share their experience. This can give them the proper mindset to allow them to flourish in parenthood (Arky, 2023)

Though the social aspect can reap benefits, it can also have negative effects on the mental health of parents producing it, and the parents consuming it. Social media can act as a way to seek validation. According to Walrave (2022), one of the primary reasons that parents post social media content is to shape impressions on how they perform as parents. This seeking of validation of how they are as a parent can lead to constant social comparison. While social comparison is a normal thought that many (especially new) parents have, social media can create a surplus of it, leading parents to feel lesser about their parenting. Research indicates that higher uses of Facebook were related to increased parental stress for newer parents (Bartholomew, et al., 2012). This can also happen to parent influencers as they receive hate comments, and harsh criticisms on the way they parent their child. This can damage the way they approach parenting, and make them feel less secure/overthink the way they raise their child. One of the primary speculated reasons for the association of increased social media use, and parental stress derives from parents trying to portray themselves as ‘perfect’, and chronic negative comparison (Riu & Stefanone, 2013). Social comparison can also lead into the opposite direction, and lead to parents bragging about how they parent their children(Harrison, 2022). This bragging can make other parents feel more insecure, and also has the potential to be less respondent to change, and/or criticism.

These negative influences on the parent’s mental health creates negative strains

on the parent's relationship with their kids. When a parent is too involved with social media, and the social aspects of their parenting, their relationship with their children can be heavily strained. Some research indicates that increased social media use can create less family communication, and have negative impacts on certain parent-child relationships (Sampasa-Kanyinga, et al., 2019). Parent influencers can be more focused on content, which sometimes takes priority over well-being. In the parenting sphere there have been countless videos in which parents discipline their children on camera, or talk about personal issues with them for content. The act of the public shaming on the social media pages can build resentment from the kid (Romero, 2023) This practice can create disconnect in the parent-child relationship, and make the child feel as if their concerns/issues are frivolous. It can also make the child seem as if they are simply a brand extension if their problems are constantly being used for content. "For the influencer mums, while there was some hesitation related to the privacy of their children, a few seemed less concerned with the rights of their children, given that the children were young and unable to speak for themselves. Such attitudes support an argument that some influencer mum bloggers may view their children as 'brand extensions' of their own blog/personal brand"(Archer, 2019)

Another issue raised with the involvement of social media in parenthood is the loss of control. Once a parent's brand becomes large enough, anyone is able to use their pictures for their own purpose. Child abuse investigators have found that even innocent photos can be misconstrued on explicit platforms (Ferrara, et al.,2023). This can make the parent feel as if their safety is at risk, and greatly increase their paranoia, and stress. In addition it raises safety concerns for their children's safety.

Content creation involving children is abundant with potential harms to children, and their parents. Though it can bring some benefits such as financial, and emotional support, it also has

the capability to harm. Child influencers are more likely to be exposed to financial exploitation, toxic childhood stress, and higher risk of mental illness later in life. Parents who run these blogs are more likely to compare themselves with other parents, have privacy risks, and a strained relationship with their child. This is a growing, and relatively new industry, so the sooner that we are able to add regulations, the sooner kids will be helped.

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