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Child viewers' engagement with social media influencers: Exercising socialisation-driven agency☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines child consumers' engagement with child influencers via YouTube and the implications for agency development among viewers. The study used a multi-method 'Mosaic Approach', involving arts-based activities, focus groups and interviews with child consumers and their parents, to capture child consumers' and their parents' experiences, reflections and practices. The data illustrate how learning, self-awareness and shared experiences of the world were developed, articulated and critically assessed across, and in relation to, their engagement. Based on the findings, it is argued that exposure and interactions with child influencers' content contribute to the construction of 'socialisation-driven agency', which child consumers enacted in their own life spheres. This research thus identifies how child influencers drive engagement among viewers, and it demonstrates how child consumers exercise their agency by co-creating knowledge and competencies through engagement.

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have become an integral part of children's daily lives, influencing how they connect with and learn from others. Consequently, children's socialisation, the process by which they adopt and adapt norms, behaviours and roles, has evolved (Riesmeyer, 2020; Shin, 2015). Platforms such as YouTube are key arenas for these processes, where young people's mediated interactions intersect with the development of self-awareness, relational identities and their agency (Balleys et al., 2020). Concerns about the risks of digital engagement including the exploitation of potentially vulnerable individuals and the promotion of consumerism are valid (De Veirman et al., 2019; Feller & Burroughs, 2022; Rasmussen et al. 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to examine how interactions via these platforms facilitate the development of creativity, self-expression and skills that underpin children's socialisation and their sense of agency.

Agency, defined as the perceived capacity of individuals to exercise power and influence by mobilising resources and capabilities (Kozinets et al., 2004; Riesmeyer, 2020), plays a crucial role in how children interact with their environments. In consumption contexts, agency includes the ability to interpret, utilise and engage with consumption-related objects, actors, actions, spaces and experiences to pursue personal goals (ibid.). While previous research has recognised the importance of adult and adolescent consumers' agency, including in relation to and in the context of technological platforms (e.g., Kozinets et al., 2021), children's agency within the domain of digital consumption remains under-conceptualised (Shengjergji, 2024).

Child influencers have emerged as prominent figures who significantly impact children's socialisation, development and self-conceptions (Balleys et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2019). A child influencer is a minor who has gained popularity on social media platforms by sharing engaging content, attracts a substantial following and often collaborates with brands to promote products or services (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020). The growing phenomenon of child influencers who engage their audiences via YouTube (Balleys et al., 2020; Vaudrey, 2022) underscores the need to re-evaluate children's roles in digital media as active, agentic beings with the capacity to interpret, adopt and adapt through their engagement.

Globally, YouTube is used by 63 % of children for approximately 96 min daily (Qustodio, 2023), with the top child influencer boasting over 123 million subscribers worldwide (Statista, 2024). Children-oriented YouTube content blurs the divide between entertainment and advertising (Vaudrey, 2022), featuring diverse forms such as music performances, pranks, tutorials, gaming and product reviews (Martínez &

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Olsson, 2019; Özbek & Sofuoğlu-Kiliç, 2020). Engaging with this content can foster early consumerist attitudes and drive learning processes that can shape self-conceptions and consumer behaviours in later life (De Veirman et al., 2019; Hains & Jennings, 2021; Rasmussen et al., 2022). Hence the need to examine how children's engagement with child influencers via YouTube informs their socialisation.

Sampaio et al. (2020) and others have stressed the importance of understanding the processes and practices of children's interaction with child influencers. This includes scrutinising which features and qualities make influencers and their content appealing and why, as well as the consequences of their interactions. Examining children's perspectives of their interactions with child influencers, their experiences, and the outcomes of their online engagement with their peers is important for applied and critical marketing research because it helps to assess the risks and opportunities that may have longer term impact on their development as citizens and consumers (Pinto et al., 2023).

Moreover, Schill et al. (2020) argued that the exploration of children's agency has frequently been neglected in research. Scott et al. (2023) also highlighted the limited understanding of agency regarding children's engagement on YouTube. Finally, there is an urgent need to understand how young children actively shape their identities and consumer behaviours through their engagement with influencer content, given the scale, accessibility, and persuasive nature of such content in their daily lives (Hains & Jennings, 2021; Kucirkova et al., 2024). With children now spending an average of over 11 h a week on YouTube, their interactions with influencer-driven content play an increasingly formative role in their social development (Qustodio, 2023; Tuominen et al., 2023). However, existing research has provided limited insight of children's own experiences and agentic engagement with this content, or of the nuanced ways this may shape their emerging self-conceptions and consumer agency.

Drawing on data generated through a multi-method Mosaic Approach, this paper addresses these practical and theoretical challenges, and contributes to knowledge by examining the dynamics and implications of young children's engagement with child influencers via YouTube. Our empirical data provide detailed insights into evolving socio-cultural factors that are necessary to comprehend socialisation processes (Danziger, 2013), particularly in technology-mediated societies (Riesmeyer, 2020). Moreover, we focus on child influencers who use YouTube because of the need to assess how the content they disseminate through this global platform shapes consumption among child viewers (Pereira et al., 2018). Importantly, we examine how child viewers interpret media influencers' content, evaluate it and synthesise the knowledge they glean, because it is crucial to understanding how children in contemporary, media-rich environments develop their critical faculties, broaden their socio-cultural competencies and assert their place in the world (Martínez & Olsson, 2019).

We address two research questions: 1. What are key experiential features of these child influencers and their content that drive children to engage with them as viewers? and 2. What are the implications of children's engagement with YouTube's child influencers via this platform for their emerging self-conceptions and sense of agency? In answering these questions, this paper makes two key contributions. First, it extends theoretical understanding of children's agency by foregrounding their perspectives and meaning-making repertoires. The paper proposes that processes of mediated engagement and critical reflection underpin what we refer to as *socialisation-driven agency*. We show how child consumers' learning and self-awareness are tied to and emerge through technology-mediated interaction; we demonstrate how influencers' behaviours and experiences are used by child viewers to comprehend and articulate their own positionality; and we reveal how child consumers translate knowledge and competencies developed through online engagement into their lives. Our proposed conceptualisation emphasises that children's agency should be considered relational and emergent, developing through and in relation to interactions with child influencers. This perspective recognises that child influencers are potentially significant socialising agents, but it also underscores child viewers' capacity to interpret, question and utilise these digitally mediated interactions to develop their sense of agency and to enact their agency in their life spheres. Second, it provides practical insights for socially-oriented marketers, educators and policy-makers regarding the opportunities and risks of enrolling child influencers in the development of child viewers' digital literacy and critical capabilities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Children's socialisation

Socialisation is a lifelong process through which individuals internalise societal norms, values, and behaviours (Bandura, 1977). Observation and imitation are key social learning mechanisms, through which people encounter and adopt norms and behaviours that are reinforced through ongoing interactions with socialising agents (Bandura, 1977). However, socialisation extends beyond transmission and imitation. As individuals develop their self-conceptions and critical faculties, they respond to social stimuli through interpretation, adaptation or resistance, crafting their identities and enacting their agency through these processes (Riesmeyer, 2020).

Childhood and adolescence are critical phases of life long socialisation. Traditionally, parents, relatives, and close peers were the primary agents of children's socialisation (Anastasiu, 2011). These influential actors instil cultural values and societal norms, for example, through instruction, behavioural modelling and participating in social activities with children (Wang et al., 2015). As children age, peers emerge as significant influencers, shaping behaviours, attitudes, and identity development through shared experiences and social dynamics (Anastasiu, 2011). Adolescents navigate between parental guidance and peer interactions to construct their sense of self and belonging within familial and mainstream cultures (Wang et al., 2015).

Socialisation is increasingly being shaped by advances in pervasive communication technologies, particularly as children take a greater role in consuming and producing social media content (Balleys et al., 2020; Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2019). Socialisation can occur through social media platforms as children co-create content, navigate identities, build connections and engage with culture (Balleys et al., 2020; Tuominen et al., 2023). Tuominen et al.'s (2023) work highlights the dynamic interplay between digital socialisation and children's active engagement, stressing the need to examine how agency emerges through or in relation to platform mediated interactions among children.

2.2. Children's agency in contemporary society

Agency more generally can be viewed as the perceived capacity to exercise power and influence by mobilising resources and capabilities (Kozinets et al., 2004; Moore, 2016). Scholars such as Synofzik et al (2008) further distinguished between non-conceptual 'feelings of agency', from a higher-level 'judgement of agency', where actors consciously attribute their capacities to make decisions, exercise judgement and assert their influence. Agency is most often conceptualised as the property or capacity of individuals (Burkitt, 2016; Moore, 2016). However, following Burkitt (2016), agency can be considered as emerging through 'relatedness to others'. Social relations cannot be reduced to conscious or deliberative mental processes, but also involve embodied actions and have affective dimensions. This conceptualisation moves agency beyond the cognitive realm, connecting it to emotions and behaviours associated with interactions that take place 'across time and place' (Burkitt, 2016). This approach is particularly relevant to understanding the dynamics and implications of engagement between child influencers and the child consumers who develop their agency through technology-mediated socialisation.

Childhood studies have increasingly recognised children's agency as

an integral component of their social experiences (Baader, 2016). Early classifications positioned children as 'pre-adults becoming,' emphasising their developmental limitations and dependence (James et al., 1998). Uprichard (2008) criticised this limited perspective, proposing a dual approach that views children as both 'beings' and 'becomings'. As 'beings', children are active social actors shaping their own experiences, while as 'becomings', they are constantly developing new capacities and understandings (James & Prout, 2015). This approach highlights the dynamic, multifaceted and emergent nature of children's agency, developed and articulated as they navigate and shape their social worlds.

The rise of digital technologies has introduced new dimensions to children's agency, reshaping how they interact, socialise and express themselves. Platforms such as YouTube provide a space where children not only consume content but actively produce and share their own, often engaging with peers and creating a shared culture (Dias Fonseca, 2019). For children, these spaces serve as global playgrounds where they can exercise their agency by setting their own rules, forming relationships, and experimenting with self-expression (Dias Fonseca, 2019).

Recent studies have suggested that children's engagement with digital platforms goes beyond passive consumption, reflecting their growing autonomy and ability to navigate digital environments (Kucirkova et al., 2024). Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) argued that children use social media to broaden their social networks and to explore their identities in the process, while Pereira et al. (2018) noted that these platforms allowed incremental steps toward greater autonomy. Digital technologies provide tools for self-expression and also create opportunities for children to participate in cultural production (as opposed to mere consumption), which further reflects their agency (Nolan et al., 2022).

For this study, agency pertains to how children engage in social interactions, developing themselves as social actors while also enhancing their understanding of the world around them. This interpretation aligns with the dual perspective of 'being' and 'becoming' (Uprichard, 2008), wherein children are active participants in their social environments but also continuously evolve through interactive experiences. Engaging with social media platforms further amplifies this process by providing spaces for children to interact with peers, experiment with self-representation, and articulate their social roles within a broader digital landscape. This dynamic interplay between social interactions and self-development underscores the importance of studying agency in digitally mediated engagement contexts.

2.3. Engagement with online influencers

Engagement refers to the interactive relationship between object (e.g., brand, organisation or influencer) and subject (consumer) (Bastrygina & Lim, 2023; Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek, 2011). It has cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions insofar as the strength and nature of the object-subject relationship are determined by perceived relevance, utility, identification or emotional affiliation (ibid.). Moreover, engagement is shaped by and manifested through actions involving attention, emulation and advocation (ibid.). In the context of online engagement, it is also important to recognise the role of platforms, as socio-technical devices, which facilitate and thus mediate object-subject relationships through their interactive design features and algorithmic protocols (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018; Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020).

In relation to online influencers, engagement is tied to the value to be gained through interacting with the influencer e.g., learning, joy, social enhancement, spiritual growth, and the level of trust afforded to the influencer e.g., based on the influencer's perceived skills, experiences, or relatable intentions and principles (Bastrygina & Lim, 2023; Kozinets et al., 2023). Engagement across cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions enables influencers to establish a sense of community and connection among audiences, reinforcing the shared values and norms of their digital networks (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023). These dimensions are reflected in how users process content intellectually, connect with it emotionally, and demonstrate their active participation through actions like sharing, commenting, or creating related new content (Bastrygina & Lim, 2023).

Hollebeek (2011) further underscored that the three dimensions of engagement are interdependent, with cognitive effort, emotional involvement, and behavioural activation working together to influence the depth and quality of object-subject relationships. Additionally, Brodie et al. (2019) highlighted the iterative and dynamic nature of engagement, where ongoing interactions deepen connections and strengthen relationships within networks. This corresponds to Burkitt's (2016) conception of relational agency as it is constructed and negotiated through unfolding interactions through which socialisation is negotiated (Riesmeyer, 2020).

Borges-Tiago et al. (2022) and Van den Abeele et al. (2024) argued that some influencers achieve deeper engagement by prioritising authenticity and meaningful interactions. Among child influencers, engagement involves cultivating a sense of authenticity (Marôpo et al., 2020). Through relatable, informal conversational styles, direct calls to action and sharing personal stories, child influencers create an intimate connection with viewers, positioning themselves as peers (Marôpo et al., 2020; Tur-Viñes et al., 2018). Borges-Tiago et al. (2023) suggested that mobilising notions of authenticity is crucial for sustaining engagement and building long-term trust with audiences (see also Van den Abeele et al., 2024). Hollebeek (2011) complemented this view, emphasising that authentic engagement fosters a sense of psychological identification, where audiences see their values reflected in the content, enhancing loyalty and sustained interaction. Moreover, Hollebeek (2011) noted that high levels of behavioural absorption are critical to perpetuating engagement. In the context of online influencers, absorption is maintained by influencers' abilities to create compelling content, but also by the media platform's capacity to maintain attention (e.g., through content features and algorithmic recommendations) and to stimulate active interaction (e.g., through embedding liking, following, sharing and commenting functions) (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020).

The emergent questions for the current study concern how engagement with child online influencers transcends consumption, and thus translates into socialisation and the emergence (or enactment) of children's agency. Hence, we examine what key experiential features of child influencers and their content drive children to engage with them as viewers. Moreover, we examine the implications of children's engagement with child influencers via YouTube for their emerging self-conceptions and agency.

3. Methods

3.1. Research approach, sampling and recruitment

This research adopted a child-centred focus, with 29 children and their families participating in a multi-stage, multimodal qualitative study (Clark & Moss, 2011). Following a purposive, criterion sampling strategy, the key inclusion criteria were that the children were aged 7–10 years and regular viewers of child YouTuber videos (See Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for an overview of the sample profile). Recruitment began with contacting (via phone and/or email) 63 gatekeepers from local educational organizations, after-school clubs, activity providers, community centres, and religious groups. 13 of them promoted the study through their communication channels (e.g., newsletters, websites, posters and WhatsApp groups). In addition, online parenthood communities were also engaged via posts inviting families to participate.

Owing to the participant profile, particular care regarding ethics was observed. Ethical approval was given by the researchers' institution, and consent was acquired from parents and children at every stage of the data collection. During the recruitment, the families received detailed study information, including age-appropriate materials. Parents were

provided with a standard participant information sheet written in clear, jargon-free language explaining the study's context, while children received a child-friendly version of the information sheet, featuring cartoon characters, simple text, and visuals illustrating each stage of the data collection process. An animated video was produced by the first author to explain all stages of data collection, ensuring transparency and helping children to understand the research before deciding to participate. The video served as an information guide about the project to potential participants but also as an effective recruitment tool.

3.2. Research design and data collection

The study utilised a multi-method 'Mosaic approach' (Clark & and Moss, 2011), which enabled children to express themselves through various creative and interactive activities (Kok & Yang, 2022). Stage one, involving 29 child participants, comprised drawings and a diamond ranking card ordering exercise illustrated in Fig. 2. Stage two consisted of video elicitation and focus groups with 21 children from the larger group. Stage three involved interviews with all 29 children and 26 of their parents. Fig. 1 summarises all the research stages and the data generated.

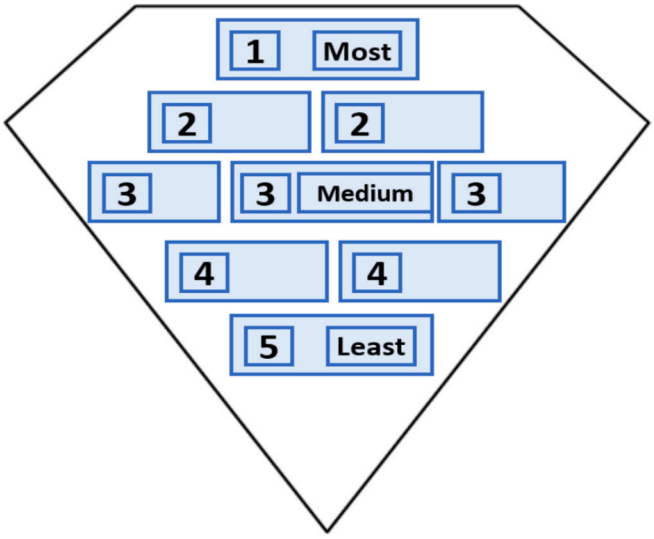


Fig. 2. Diamond ranking (based on Clark, 2012).

3.2.1. Arts-based activities: Drawing and diamond ranking

The arts-based activities and the ranking exercises were conducted at home to enable children to engage creatively and reflectively in a familiar environment while producing tangible outputs. Parents received a kit with instructions and written prompts, which asked them to present the activities without interfering in the subsequent process.

Drawing was used to elicit insights because it aligned with children's natural activities and enabled them to express their perspectives. The prompt for this activity was: 'Draw your favourite thing about child YouTuber videos.' This encouraged participants to reflect on the topic and generate responses that directly addressed the research questions (Kok & Yang, 2022).

For the diamond ranking (Fig. 2), the researcher provided each child with a template and a set of cards with pictures related to the research topic (See Appendix 3). As Clark (2012) explained, in diamond ranking, the pictures should connect to the topic and encourage varied interpretations. The pictures reflected public data on children's YouTube viewing habits involving child influencers, including toys, children playing with kitchen tools, video games, and emotions such as happy faces. The prompt presented was: 'What you like most and what you like least about child influencers' videos', with 15 different cards available. The children were asked to rank the cards according to their preferences.

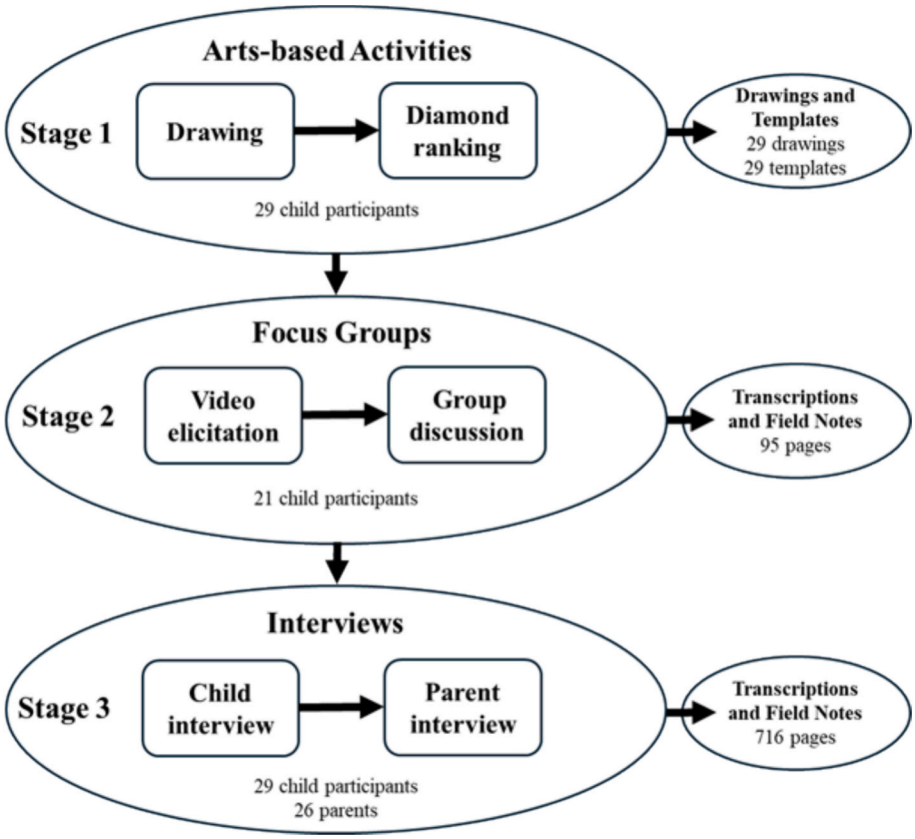


Fig. 1. Data collection stages, activities and generated outputs.

This activity enabled children to organise their thoughts and to differentiate between different aspects of their experiences, thus providing another avenue for self-expression (Niemi et al., 2018). Moreover, this process helped to elicit each child's explanation of their choices and representations in subsequent study stages.

3.2.2. Focus groups

In this stage, children were brought together in one of five groups to discuss the research topic, using video elicitation to stimulate conversation about child influencers and to encourage reflection on their own thoughts, memories and perceptions. The discussion was based on a compilation of four different popular child influencers' videos, lasting approximately 15 min. Subsequent group discussions, as described by Clark and Moss (2011), allowed the children to share thoughts, represent ideas, and engage with others, aligning with the Mosaic Approach's principle of multiple listening (Tan, 2019). To create a welcoming and comfortable environment, the focus group sessions were held in a community centre and began with ice-breaking activities. Recognising that young children have varying concentration levels, the sessions incorporated interactive elements to maintain engagement (Adler et al., 2019): they could choose a Christmas headband, guess each other's balloon colours, pop balloons and take breaks. During the groups, the mediator used the video compilation to reintroduce the topic and encouraged natural conversation. After initial questions about preferences, likes, and dislikes, discussions often flowed naturally, focusing on content such as DIY projects, toys, and video games. When the conversation stalled, the mediator asked questions like 'What's your favourite type of video?' or 'Have you ever tried doing something you saw in a video?' For quieter groups, additional prompts such as 'What do you talk about with friends or family regarding these videos?' or 'If you could make your own video, what would it be about?' were used to encourage participation while respecting those who preferred not to share.

3.2.3. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with child participants and parents were conducted in their homes or public spaces. The interview questions were developed from the literature on (online) engagement (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek, 2011), encompassing emotional (e.g., feelings towards and evoked by influencers and their content), cognitive (e.g., interpretations of content and influencers' behaviours, and learning), and behavioural dimensions (e.g., (re)actions and social participation). Questions such as 'Do you have a favourite Child YouTuber?' were followed by follow-up probes, e.g., 'Can you tell me a little bit about this (these) guy(s)?', 'What do they talk about?', 'How do their videos make you feel?', 'Do your friends or classmates talk about Child YouTubers?' and 'Could you share with me how you and your friends or classmates talk about the Child YouTuber videos?' During the interviews, children were also asked about the drawings and rankings they had created using a 'show and tell' approach, rather than any interpretation from the researchers (Kok & Yang, 2022).

At this stage, parents were also interviewed to complement the children's voices. They were asked to provide insights into their children's personality traits, behaviours and practices. The interviews also helped to elaborate on issues that emerged during the other data collection stages e.g., regarding the relationships between their children and the child influencers. The majority of parents were interviewed separately from their children. In a small number of cases, due to space limitations (e.g., small houses or apartments), children remained in the same room. In these cases, they were encouraged to engage in other activities, and the potential for this to affect parents' responses was noted and considered during data analysis.

3.3. Data analysis

Data collection and the 'reflexive thematic analysis' (Braun et al., 2023) were conducted in close sequence, and data collection ceased once saturation was deemed to have been reached. The data generated (see Fig. 1) were classified as visual (drawings, diamond ranking templates) and textual (transcriptions of interviews, focus groups, field notes), and analysed initially by the first author who led the data collection. The analysis used the data in combination as a data triangulation strategy to ensure diverse perspectives were included and to enhance the credibility of the analysis.

The two research questions guided the thematic analysis: To address RQ1 concerning key experiential features of child influencers and their content that drove child viewers' engagement, the visual data from Stage 1 were coded and reordered into thematic categories such as creativity, relatability and content preferences (e.g., toys, games, and cooking). Focus groups in Stage 2 provided insights into collaborative interpretations of content and shared social norms, as a response to RQs 1 and 2 concerning the implications of children's engagement with YouTube's child influencers for their emerging self-conceptions and sense of agency. The interviews in Stage 3 delved into affective (e.g., enjoyment, inspiration), cognitive (e.g., learning, understanding), and behavioural (e.g., imitation, adaptation) dimensions, responding to both RQs. Parental interviews contextualised children's behaviours within family environments. Throughout the process of coding, interpretation and data ordering, the first author reflected critically on the implications of his actions in generating the data (e.g., in questioning, prompting, challenging), and on how his knowledge and experience (e.g., as parent, adult, researcher) may shape how the findings could be understood.

The analysis involved multiple rounds, as the data were re-examined in light of new information generated through different stages of fieldwork. NVivo software was utilised to manage the substantial volume of visual and textual data, aiding in the identification of major themes. To further enhance analytical relevance, a visual graphic tool (Corel Draw) was used as a digital whiteboard. This combination of tools and methods ensured that the thematic analysis was data-driven, providing deep insights into children's engagement processes and outcomes, facilitating critical understating of the coded material, and how it translated into higher-order themes (see Table 1). These processes of data ordering and display also enabled the second and third author to examine and challenge the coding assigned to specific data, the ordering of coded data into first-order thematic groupings and their subsequent assembly into higher-order categories.

Multiple rounds of analysis were conducted, and the initial open coding of the three data sets was replaced by focused coding, with the researchers re-examining the thematic findings in dialogue with relevant literature, and using the core research questions to sensitise and guide the interpretation and final display of data. Throughout this process, the data from the three sources – arts-based activities, group discussions, and interviews with children and parents – were used to cross-check the individual and team-based interpretations to provide a comprehensive perspective, and to enhance the credibility and dependability of the process.

4. Findings

The findings highlighted the transformational possibilities of child consumers' engagement with child influencers. The data showed that perceptions of and interactions with child influencers drove socialisation processes that helped the young people to construct and articulate their sense of agency. Specifically, the findings begin by showing how social media influencers created relatable content, which contributed to co-created learning and prompted a sense of self-awareness among their child consumers that underpinned the development of their agency. The second part of the findings explores how engagement between child influencers and their viewers helped to construct shared experiences, which reinforced the potential for socialisation through which relational agency emerged. The final part of the findings examines how engagement shaped self-conceptions among the child viewers and further translated into the exercise of their agency.

Table 1
Examples of the analysis process and theme generation.

Raw Data (Examples)	Codes	Higher order themes	Related literature	RQ (s)
'I like how they show every step and remind us to take it easy—I don't feel rushed.' 'They use children's words…' '…it's like they know I need a little extra time.' '…she says "Pause if you need to!"'	Comprehensible pacing, Effective explanation	Relatability, Learning, Self-Awareness	Digital platforms foster identity exploration and co-created learning (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; and Riesmeyer, 2020).	1
'I saw her video talking about fasting for Ramadan, and it made me understand what my family does.' 'Elaina [YouTuber] explained the verse I had to say at the Christmas party, so I finally got what the 3 presents mean!'	Familial influence, Cultural content	Relatability, Learning, Self-Awareness	Relatable content fosters cultural resonance (Riesmeyer, 2020 and Balleys et al., 2020).	1
'Her mom always helps her with her homework on the videos, and my mom does the same for me when I get stuck.' 'I saw her video about family dinners and realized I love when my family eats together on weekends.'	Reflecting on real-life experiences: shared familial dynamics	Shared Experiences, Positionality	Children as 'beings' and 'becomings' in agency development (Uprichard, 2008 and James & Prout, 2015).	1 & 2
'He builds such nice houses in Minecraft—it's exactly what I try to do in my game too! I drew it.' 'I really enjoy how she opens the LOL dolls and tells stories about them—it made me want to create my own stories with my dolls too!'	Identification, Enjoyment	Shared Experiences, Positionality	Children's consumer culture intersects with identification processes (Hains & Jennings, 2021 and Tuominen et al., 2023).	1 & 2
'Luna [daughter] saw a YouTuber baking microwave cookies and made her own with rainbow sprinkles instead of chocolate — it was a bit messy, but lovely to see her so creative!' 'I watched a YouTuber cooking and decided to create my own recipe to share on TikTok. That's why I put this picture here.'	Spontaneity, Creativity, Adaptation	Creative Translation	Relational agency emerging through social interactions (Burkitt, 2016) and creative practices in digital spaces (Dias Fonseca, 2019).	2
'I tried making slime like she did, but I added glitter and my favourite colours to make it cooler.' 'He prepared a 3-ingredient breakfast for me and his daddy, a recipe he saw on HiHo Kids, but he added strawberries and honey because he thought it would make it better.'	Experimentation, Personalisation	Creative Translation	Social media fosters relational dynamics, experimentation, and creative personalization (Balleys et al., 2020 and Kozinets et al., 2021).	2

4.1. Socialisation, learning and self-awareness

The data indicated that the child influencers made information accessible, which facilitated child consumers' learning, thus contributing to the development of their sense of agency. Specifically, the influencers' ability to convey potentially complex ideas enabled knowledge to be co-constructed between them and their (child) viewers. The importance of this accessible engagement was captured by Rick (7, focus group) when he noted that:

> *…they [child influencers] use children's words, they explain things in an easy way. Sometimes, when a step is too complicated, they explain twice, or they say, "pause the* video *and try this step again if you are struggling with this part of the slime recipe or craft".*

This sentiment was echoed by Violet (7, focus group), who appreciated the YouTubers' use of simple language: '*…they use our words, they don't complicate the things*'. Others also noted that they found these influencers comprehensible and helpful because '*they don't rush through things*' (Noah, 10, focus group), and were '*good explainers*' (Stella, 8, focus group). The influencers' capacity to facilitate knowledge co-creation and learning was also noted by some of the parents. For example, Hana (Violet's mother) said:

> *I don't love all of them—some are just about Barbie dolls—but I've noticed how much Violet enjoys watching those girls explain things step by step. It's not just entertainment; she's learning problem-solving skills and becoming more patient when things don't work out the first time.*

These types of comments highlighted the agency of child influencers, which manifested in their ability to present information in ways that were aligned with communication patterns, codes and cultural references of their young audiences. This approach by the child influencers had communicative and translational dimensions insofar as they were able to convey the importance or relevance of objects, ideas or practices. First, it made the content more comprehensible; and second, it made content relatable, thus enhancing the learning experience by turning it into a collaborative endeavour between the child content creators and viewers.

These types of observations regarding influencers' communication skills also highlighted the agency of young consumers insofar as they recognised and valorised these capabilities, and internalised what it meant for their comprehension and the experience of engaging with the child influencers. Communicative capacities, recognition of their value and of the learning this enabled could be considered as fundamental drivers of the development of agency. Moreover, learning was not limited to the performative or cognitive abilities of either party alone, but emerged through their ability to mobilise their capabilities in, across and following their (virtual) interactions.

The transformative capacity of this type of collaborative learning was highlighted when the child consumers related these experiences to other aspects of their lives, for instance, concerning religious domains of cultural practice. For example, Rick (7, interview), noted in relation to specific cultural knowledge and practices:

> *…my mum found some* videos *of children talking about the Quran, we are Muslim, you know? Then I started watching their* videos*, my favourite one is called Active Muslim Kids, but I also watch Junior Recitation by Huda and I watch all* videos *made by Maryam Masud… but I watch other* videos *too.*

Bea (9, interview) made similar observations when discussing the drawing she made during the interview: '*…here is one of my favourite* videos *of children singing Christian songs, I watch them because I am in the church choir, and my mother said I should practise more*'. Her drawing (Fig. 3) captured the intersection of their digital and (offline) socio-cultural practices, illustrating different types of her favourite elements. Alongside her comments, it illustrated how she used child influencers' content to enhance her participation in religious practices. These online resources resonated with and were integrated into the participants' personal and cultural identities. Daisy (mother of Bea and Carla) added:



Fig. 3. Bea's drawing.

[Bea] said that Yasmin, a YouTuber, told this Bible story in one of her videos*. I liked that. I think this kind of content can encourage them to learn more about religion. She mentioned Noah's Ark, and I encouraged her to look for more information about it.*

Engaging with child influencers not only enhanced child consumers' understanding of specific cultural practices, such as those related to religion, but they also deepened their self-awareness. This engagement highlighted how the knowledge co-created through YouTube interactions connected to broader social practices, in this case, particularly in the context of religious identities.

Lisa, mother of Lia (9), similarly noted the impacts of this co-created learning on her child's self-awareness and confidence to extend and apply their emerging agency in other life spheres:

Lia followed a petit gâteau recipe from a French YouTuber girl, and it was more than just cooking. It was so cute to see; she learned to follow instructions and gained the confidence to cycle two miles to the store alone. It was amazing to see her grow, and it made me more confident in her too. I felt both scared and proud.

Lia (9, interview) had similar reflections on the same experience:

It took a while to convince my parents to let me go [to the store] by myself. At first, I was scared I'd mess something up, but when I finally did it, I felt like, "Wow, I can actually do this!" It made me feel like I can try more things on my own.

The parent's observation that she and her daughter were learning and growing together reflected an increased awareness of the child's developing independence and capabilities, as going out by herself was a statement of confidence for the child and the mother. Importantly, beyond the parents, the children appreciated, and were thus conscious of, how and why the child influencers exercised their agency in facilitating engagement that drove co-created learning.

…Becket [a child influencer] explained how to complete John's Puzzle Game, and even though I like grown-up YouTubers like Brownlee, for video *game tips, I still prefer the kid YouTubers. They seem to know which levels are harder for us kids. (Noah, 10, focus group).*

Similarly:

I prefer Ava [another child influencer] and her Roblox livestreams. The adult gamers are fun, but kids are easier to understand. Their hands are shaped like ours—I couldn't reach the active command [on a particular gaming console] and used the left click before, but Ava taught me how. (Andrea, 8, focus group).

These extracts from a focus group session highlighted how child influencers boosted children's self-conceptions and confidence through relatable guidance. Their peer advice simplified tasks, helping children to recognise and enhance their skills, in these cases, regarding gaming. This process made challenges more manageable and also fostered a growing awareness of their sense of agency as children recognised their developing abilities, which was attributed to their interactions with the child influencers.

However, it is also important to note that the child viewers displayed critical capabilities when reflecting on these interactions. For example, several recalled instances when they knew that the influencers were pretending but accepted the value of the spectacle. In reference to an influencer's surprise party, Giani (9, interview) observed:

She pretended she didn't know, but I think she wanted to make the surprise more exciting, or maybe she didn't want to spoil the surprise party their parents prepared…. She knew that they were preparing a surprise birthday party because she was wearing a light orange and pink tulle dress….They [Child influencers] somewhat prepare the things before filming the videos*, but it doesn't mean that is everything is faked.*

In appraising this type of pretence, Stella (8, focus group) commented: '*I sometimes exaggerate too, so Maya might do the same, and sometimes some stuff seems like pretending, but it's just exaggeration*'. These types of reflections highlighted that the child viewers often scrutinised the behaviours, values and attitudes displayed by the child influencers rather than accepting them at face value. The child viewers exercised their agency, as critical consumers, questioning the meanings of and motivations behind child influencers' content. The child viewers often commented on the superficial nature of their interactions with the child influencers, and of the contrived nature of their relationship. For example, Gisele (7, interview) noted: '*Of course Aliyah is not my friend, she does not live here in [my city]*'. Similarly, Bea (9, interview) jokingly observed: '*I like when she says something like: "I have to tell you something, but you must keep it a secret", it's weird and at the same time it is funny because it seems that she trusts me*'. Or, alternatively, '*Even if I could write a comment, probably she wouldn't read it, she might be busy with the school stuff and the ideas for the* videos*. Also, she has so many subscribers, she probably could not reply to everyone*' (Giani, 9, focus group). The child viewers recognised that the scope and depth of their engagement had boundaries, which further reflected their judgement and their agency in deconstructing these relationships.

In summary, the child influencers stimulated learning and personal growth through engagement via the social media platform, which prompted their young audiences to translate these experiences into development opportunities. Importantly, the skills and insights gained through these platform-mediated interactions, such as improved self-confidence or enhanced abilities in specific practice domains, translated beyond the screen and into the children's real-world experiences. This dynamic helped shape how children perceived themselves and their roles within wider social contexts, reinforcing their sense of identity and agency in online and offline realms. However, rather than viewing this reductively as behavioural modelling that reflects one-way processes of

emulative socialisation, the data demonstrate the child consumers' capacity to engage with this content in diverse, critical and nuanced ways as they integrated these into their self-conceptions and social practices. Moreover, the data showed how the sense of agency was constructed through and in relation to the interactions between content creator, consumer and the other actors (i.e. parents and carers), with whom they shared these spaces.

4.2. Socialisation, shared experiences and positionality

A second key dimension in the construction of agency concerned the capacity of child influencers to represent lifeworlds or experiences of the world that the child viewers could relate to and use to reflect upon their positionality. Specifically, in depicting social and domestic situations that were familiar to child consumers, the child influencers co-created shared experiences of the world that prompted reflection among their viewers, through which the children questioned their place in and relationship with the wider world.

Vivian (7, interview) exemplified this as she identified with her favourite YouTuber due to shared familial dynamics: '*She is the middle child, so am I, and her brother is always interrupting her* videos*. I know how she feels*'. Vivian's use of the diamond ranking (see Fig. 4), positioning the girl in the upper part of the hierarchy, also stressed this connection by making explicit the girl's place in this social realm. Moreover, identifying with the child influencer fostered a sense of peer validation for Vivian, knowing that her experiences of family life were also present in the lives of the influencer. Seeing these familiar worlds and relatable subjective experiences contributed to the development of the child



Fig. 4. Vivian's diamond ranking.

viewer's sense of identity and positionality in relation to others in her social worlds. Arguably, nurturing awareness of one's positionality in the world underpinned a sense of agency among child viewers. Vivian concluded: '*Sometimes when I watch her* videos*, it feels like she's going through the same stuff I do. It makes me think, "Maybe I'm not so different after all*"'. Ruby (mother of Ophelia and two older children) had similar interpretations:

> *Fely often says that certain parts of the family YouTuber* videos*, especially those about silly arguments over space or privacy, reflect her own family life. I think they help her feel less alone as the middle child and give her a way to share her feelings with us.*

Beyond depicting familiar social relations, showing other aspects of their material cultures also conveyed shared experiences, which underpinned awareness of child viewers' relationships in and with the wider world. Toys often featured in child influencer videos and held particular importance. These toys, beyond being just playthings, served as symbols of peer culture and personal possessions, and were the first form of private property for many children. It has been argued that these possessions and children's relations with them play a critical role in shaping children's identities and positionality as consumers (Hains & Jennings, 2021). For instance, Gisele (7, interview) revealed a preference for child influencers who interacted with toys in ways that resonated with her own play patterns, highlighting a participatory engagement that mirrored her personal agency and preferences. Gisele valued the kindness and care exhibited by her favourite child influencers towards their dolls, a trait she shared: '*Those girls YouTubers… they really look like they are enjoying showing her dolls. They are nice, and they look after her reborn baby dolls. So do I!*'.

Gisele's identification with YouTubers who shared similar traits and behaviours reinforced the value of her worldviews. She enjoyed watching adult and child influencers who collected baby dolls. However, she expressed her preference for child influencers despite them having fewer dolls than adults. When asked why, she stated '*…because child influencers actually play with the dolls, while adults only collect and store them, which seems like a waste of money*'. This observation reflected Gisele's self-recognition processes based on a reflexive awareness of familiar experiences and recognisable behaviours exhibited by child influencers as they also displayed their appreciation of the dolls by actively playing with them. Gisele's father (Alfie) added:

> *These dolls are quite expensive, so I don't buy them often, but I see her making the most of this toy. It seems to have deepened her attachment to her dolls. It's no longer just play—she takes real care of them, almost like the girls on YouTube do.*

Similar patterns of shared experiences translating into identification was evidenced by other parents. For example:

> *…Beth loves watching Ohana's* videos *because she talks about everyday things as well, like playing with her siblings or helping with chores, doing homework. They seem like a normal family, not just showing off toys, but sharing real-life routines. Beth is an only child, I know it's hard, it's as if she sees a bit of herself in those* videos*, and it helps her understand that everyone faces challenges and has responsibilities.*
> *(Valerie, mother of Beth, 8).*

This parent's reflections underscored how child influencers helped co-create shared experiences by representing everyday life, making children feel seen and understood. Through relatable content, these influencers fostered a sense of belonging, helping children recognise their experiences as part of a broader, shared reality and reflect on their positionality within it. Other evidence of this emerged in the focus groups. For example, Peter (8) noted: '*When Jake [another YouTuber] talks about his football practice with his mom, it makes me feel like I'm not the only one who finds it hard sometimes, not having kids nearby to play with*'. Shared experiences and feelings, for example of loneliness, frequently emerged as topics during focus group discussions. Children

noted how watching child influencers who shared similar challenges, like balancing activities or coping with the absence of nearby friends, helped them feel less isolated. These findings highlighted the role of relatable content in fostering a sense of connection and belonging among young viewers, reinforcing the idea that they are not alone in their experiences.

4.3. Socialisation and creative translation

The previous findings demonstrated how engagement with child influencers translated into a sense of self-awareness, and the capacity to comprehend one's positionality in the world, which can be seen as components of socialisation underpinning their relational sense of agency. However, for many of our respondents, it translated into changes in their creative practices. Their engagement influenced children's own digital content creation, but it also shaped how they approached broader domains of practice, as they adapted ideas, know-how and behaviours encountered through influencer content into other areas of their everyday lives.

Although not all participants were social media content creators, six child participants identified as content creators and mentioned that they honed their skills by observing child influencers' videos or using other videos to gather information for their own social media content. During a focus group, Diego (10) enthusiastically shared that he was a '*TikToker*' who adapted ideas from child influencers' videos for his own social media content. His drawing also reflected this connection between child influencer videos, other social media platforms, and self-expression (see Fig. 5). Diego's drawing depicted several elements that drove him to watch child influencer videos, with the bottom left, representing his identity as a TikToker. His engagement with this content, was reflected in the musical notes, symbolising how he transformed the inspiration he drew from the child influencer (on YouTube) into his own creative expression on TikTok. Similarly, Luna (8) explained that she watched young YouTubers singing to perfect her falsetto tones before recording her own singing videos to post on TikTok. Ben (8) often shared his culinary creations on Instagram, using family recipes and drawing inspiration from child influencer channels to create new hybrid inventions. Another parent, Tanya (mother of Noah and Vivian) observed:

> *I love seeing them get creative in the kitchen. Those YouTubers have shown them that cooking isn't just about following recipes—it's about trying new things and making them their own. Of course, there's always a mess to clean up afterward…*

Engaging with the child influencers via social media provided a space for children to explore, experiment, and articulate their own values, which underpinned their sense of agency. In these scenarios, the children could mobilise the capabilities they developed through YouTube-based interactions to redefine and redeploy in their own (virtual and physical) domains of practice. Their examples of reception, interpretation and integration highlighted how learning translated into a sense of agency and the capacity to exercise it.

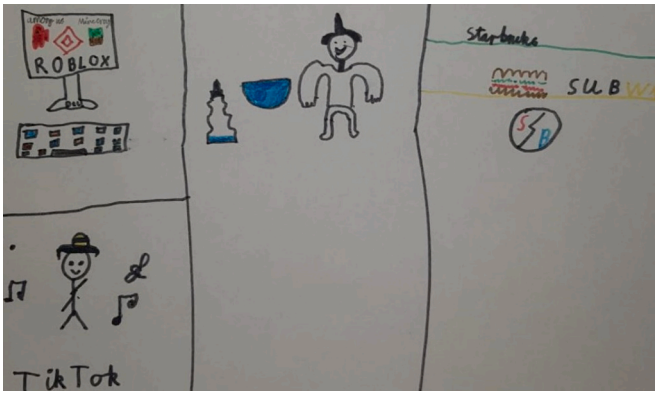


Fig. 5. Diego's drawing.

However, while it is essential to recognise the children's agency, it is crucial to stress that this developed through interactions with a variety of actors. Paola (mother of Stella, 8) stated that her daughter was initially very shy, but the process of mimicking child influencer videos helped build her self-confidence in public speaking. Consequently, she encouraged Stella to create a YouTube channel to share videos with close friends and family through private links. This highlights that the reification or exercise of agency was not determined exclusively by the child consumers, through internal cognitive processes, but also relied on the engagement with other actors, such as their parents or carers, as well as the child influencers, and agency was constructed, relationally, in and across their shared space(s).

It is important to recognise that engagement among child influencers and their viewers was mediated by the social media platform. Child influencer accounts (on YouTube) do not permit children or adults to post comments on videos. Nevertheless, likes, views, and shares were indicators of engagement for child influencers, which informed the content they created and how they presented themselves (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). The social media platform features thus provided additional feedback mechanisms through which relational agency was constructed and enacted by child social media consumers.

Finally, while the data highlighted children's capacity for critical reflection, certain risks appeared less visible to them. For instance, few children explicitly questioned the commercial nature of influencer content, product placements, or the persuasive intent behind endorsements. There was also limited appraisal of how systemic algorithmic recommendations might shape their viewing patterns. Most of them appreciated the recommendations, as it made them feel that the platform was presenting content that they were likely to enjoy and resonated with their interests. Additionally, while some children demonstrated an understanding of the performative aspects of influencer content, the potential pressures related to idealised lifestyles or consumerist messaging were not widely problematised. These findings suggest that, alongside the agency that children exercised, there remain areas of vulnerability that warrant further attention, particularly regarding media and advertising literacy.

5. Discussion

Socialisation-driven agency reflects the dual role of children as 'beings' actively navigating their present social contexts and as 'becomings', continuously evolving through mediated interactions in digital spaces (Uprichard, 2008). This also underscores the relational aspects of agency, shaped by the exchange of ideas, cultural narratives, and practices across social media platforms like YouTube (Balleys et al., 2020). The influencer-mediated content functioned as 'objects of stimulus' for co-constructed learning and the development of self-awareness, for the negotiation of shared experiences and positionality, and for the creative translation of digital engagement into broader cultural practices. Child influencers acted as cultural mediators and influential peers, whose online engagement potentially contributed to their child followers' socialisation by modelling values, attitudes, behaviours and norms. However, the findings challenge us to avoid conceptualising socialisation, including in mediatised contexts, as structured or predictable processes of transmission, internalisation and imitation (Bandura, 1977; Boon & Lomore, 2001; Hoffner, 1996). The children were critical, reflective consumers who actively negotiated meanings and questioned the values and attitudes presented in social media content. The child influencers, their digital content and the online engagement were reference points, which the child consumers utilised to interpret their own experiences, and to articulate their positionality, thus driving their self-awareness. Through this digitally-mediated, reflective engagement, the child consumers developed new capabilities; and these interactive processes enabled the children to

comprehend and subsequently to exercise their agency. This conceptualisation thus avoids reducing mediatised socialisation to a unidirectional, linear, primarily top-down or commercially-driven processes.

Our alternative framing positions the emergence and exercise of agency as inherently relational, echoing previous work, which suggested that agency, more generally, was constructed through and in relation to social networks and interactions (e.g., Burkett, 2016). Moreover, this perspective acknowledges that agency extends beyond individual cognitive processes, and is exercised through affective, behavioural and cognitive engagement with child influencers across socio-technological networks. This conceptualisation also recognises that a *sense of* agency is only one part of this, as agency is enacted and thus reified through the children's capacity to *use* their knowledge and skills e.g., in social situations and creative activities (cf. Synofzik et al, 2008).

The findings also enable us to identify the processes and dynamics of socialisation-driven agency. Child influencers fostered learning and identity formation by creating content that resonated with young viewers' cultural codes and social realities, transmitting information in accessible ways and presenting relatable experiences. Child viewers developed social, cultural and technical competencies and self-awareness through interacting with these influencers and their content. As Martínez and Olsson (2019) argued, their engagement shaped child viewers' self-conceptions. Importantly, these socialisation processes drove children to evaluate the norms and values presented in social media content, which underpinned their identity construction and the enactment of their agency. Consequently, child viewers could interpret and articulate their own positions in the world, utilising their emergent capabilities and exercising their agency in their social realms.

The participatory nature of platforms like YouTube further underscored the agency of child viewers. Through feedback mechanisms such as likes, shares, and subscriptions, children contribute to shaping the content they consume (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). These interactions reflect a reciprocal dynamic in which child influencers adapt their material based on audience engagement, reinforcing a sense of relevance and connection. However, these interactive mechanisms can also have unintended consequences. The focus on metrics such as likes and views can create pressure for child influencers to produce content that maximises engagement, for example by expressing controversial opinions or displaying spectacular behaviours. For viewers, the emphasis on popularity and visibility may influence their own self-concepts, fostering them to seek validation by emulating similar social media practices.

It is also important to recognise other risks associated with socialisation through child influencer–child viewer interactions. The commercial nature of much child influencer content raises well-founded concerns about the potential over-commercialisation of childhood (De Veirman et al., 2019; Rasmussen et al. 2022). For instance, many child influencers feature paid promotions or product placements that blur the lines between entertainment and advertising (Vaudrey, 2022). This can inadvertently promote consumerist attitudes, making children more susceptible to materialistic values or creating unrealistic expectations about ownership and consumption. Moreover, the emphasis on curated and performative lifestyles in influencer content can also reinforce stereotypes or contribute to identity struggles, especially if children perceive a gap between their reality and the idealised portrayals they observe online. For example, heavily branded content might lead children to associate self-worth with material possessions or conformity to specific trends. Our data did not provide strong evidence of overt materialism, although in some cases there was perceived confusion between advertising and entertainment among the child participants. While some references to branded items appeared in the data, these were more commonly related to peer culture or identity expression, and explicit materialistic attitudes were not prominent.

Finally, the findings suggested that parents play an important role in shaping their children's social media engagement and the development of socialisation-driven agency. Building on Berriman's (2022) insights, the findings of this study highlighted how parents mediated the risks associated with digital interactions but also the opportunities for fostering agency. By guiding their children through social media platforms and their engagement with child influencers, parents helped to contest the traditional narrative of children as passive recipients of media content. Parents enabled children's active engagement, promoting critical literacy and reflective practices. In short, they remained influential actors in these digitally-mediated socialisation processes (cf. Van den Abeele et el., 2024).

Notten and Kraaykamp's (2009) findings align with this perspective, showing that families with higher levels of media literacy often guide children more intentionally, fostering skills such as critical thinking and self-expression. Conversely, families with fewer such socio-cultural and socio-technological resources may face challenges in supporting their children's engagement with child influencers and social media platforms, which may affect the development of socialisation-driven agency. Despite these tensions, parents across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts have the potential to play a pivotal role in shaping how their children engage with child influencers and translate interactions into opportunities for learning and agency development.

6. Conclusion

Building on the foundational work of scholars such as Balleys et al. (2020), Martínez and Olsson (2019) and Pereira et al. (2018), this study examined how child viewers engage with child influencers on YouTube, revealing how social media interactions fostered learning, self-awareness and identity formation. The findings also demonstrated how parents observe, build on and often try to negotiate these interactions as they attempt to minimise potential risks and nurture the positive outcomes for their children's development. Based on these findings, the paper proposes that these processes of mediated engagement and critical reflection underpin what is referred to as 'socialisation-driven agency'. This conceptualisation emphasises that children's agency should be considered relational and emergent, developing through and in relation to interactions with child influencers. This perspective recognises that child influencers are potentially significant socialising agents, but it also emphasises the critical capacities of child viewers to interpret, question and utilise these digitally mediated interactions to develop their sense of agency and to enact their agency in their life spheres.

6.1. Implications for theory

By recognising children's agency in navigating and interpreting the digital media landscape and their relationships with child influencers, this study avoids viewing children, reductively, as passive or naive recipients of social media content (see also Kołaszewska & Kacprzak, 2022). In doing so, it reinforces the importance of adopting a relational conceptualisation and application of agency (e.g., Burkitt, 2016) in this mediated interaction context. In reference to child consumers, foregrounding the relational aspects of agency stresses that knowledge is co-created through their interactions instead of conceiving it as a structured or linear process, involving one-way information transmission or unquestioning socialisation. Moreover, rather than conceptualising agency as the psychological capacities of individuals (Moore, 2016), it shows how agency is exercised, relationally, through critical and reflective engagement.

Socialisation-driven agency, in relation to the interactions between social media influencers and their viewers, offers a way to conceptualise the processes and practices through which agency is activated, while avoiding the assumptions that these processes operate in a structured or predictable way (cf. Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). This provides a sensitising framework for examining the co-creation of agency in other social or organisational contexts, and to explore the capacity of such agency for transformation among individuals and networks of actors

through their shared practices.

This research also extends media socialisation theory, which has traditionally focused on televised media's role in shaping societal norms. As Danziger (2013, p. 22) noted, socialisation processes are inevitably affected by wider cultural factors that continually evolve. This study reflects the contemporary life of children and their social media interactions. By doing so it develops understanding of socialisation processes within 21st century mediatised cultures through illustrating how engaging with child influencers via social media platforms enables children to adapt and integrate cultural practices, demonstrating how socialisation evolves with technological advancements.

6.2. Implications for society

This study and its findings advocate a broader acknowledgement of the positive aspects of social media engagement for children. It challenges prevailing concerns over digital media consumption by presenting evidence of its potential benefits, such as an opportunity to develop critical thinking when children engage with content produced by their peers. This shift invites policymakers, educators, and content creators to explore how social media platforms can be effectively harnessed to support children's cognitive and social development. This may be particularly important for people who may feel socially excluded, for example those from migrant backgrounds or those with disabilities.

Content creators and those concerned with education and learning can leverage the unique appeal of child influencers to design material that is not only engaging but also informative, encouraging young viewers to reflect on the norms, values, and ethical questions that arise in their daily lives. This approach can foster deeper philosophical inquiries among children, prompting them to explore how the values, attitudes and behaviours of others shape their thoughts, feelings, and interactions with the world around them.

However, it is important to recognise the potential risks posed by children's engagement with child influencers, including and especially on the consumerist values and practices that they embed through their digitally mediated socialisation. Appreciating the negative and positive aspects of these interactions is essential, especially as technology use expands across society. Socialisation-driven agency emerging through engagement with child influencers risks locking subsequent identity formation and the exercise of agency into digital consumption practices, which may restrict children's broader social and psychological development.

6.3. Implications for marketing practice

The study has demonstrated the impactful role of child influencers and their content in enriching young children's experiences of the digital realm. However, it is essential to acknowledge the risks associated with this phenomenon, particularly the pervasive presence of commercial messages and product placements in child influencers' content. These practices raise concerns about the potential exploitation of children's attention and the reinforcement of consumerist values at an early age (Coates et al., 2020). While this research did not focus extensively on product placement, the broader implications of such practices highlight the need for vigilance and critical engagement from parents and policymakers.

Despite these risks, the findings also underscore the potential for child influencers to act as mediators, helping children navigate the digital world with critical competencies. For example, their content can serve as tools to boost children's agency, enabling them to recognise and question the prevalence of commercial content. This perspective points to opportunities for those engaged in ethical and socially oriented marketing to use child influencers in campaigns aimed at fostering digital literacy and critical engagement among young audiences.

Pursuing a transformative and ethically-informed marketing agenda, which collaborates with child influencers to engage child consumers, could aid the development of a more balanced digital ecosystem. Such approaches could prioritise the educational and developmental needs of young viewers over commercial interests. In doing so, they could help cultivate a generation of social media-literate consumers who are aware of the commercial or political dimensions of online content and are also equipped to engage with it critically and responsibly. Ultimately, this transformative agenda could enrich children's understanding of consumerism and digital literacy while contributing to a healthier participatory digital culture in which children play an increasingly active and informed role as content creators in the future.

In practical terms, marketing professionals could engage with this agenda by partnering with educational organisations, NGOs or regulatory bodies to develop campaigns that actively promote advertising literacy and digital awareness. For example, initiatives such as *Be Internet Legends* (Google & Parent Zone) or UNICEF's digital citizenship programmes show how influencer-based content can be used to educate young audiences on critical digital skills (Özkul et al. 2025; Parent Zone, 2024; UNICEF, n.d.). Ethical brands, particularly in sectors such as sustainable fashion, healthy lifestyles or environmental education, could also collaborate with child influencers to co-create content that fosters mindful consumption and greater awareness of commercial messaging. Additionally, marketers could support the development of child-friendly educational content (e.g., animated explainer videos used as in this study's recruitment) that simplifies terms such as 'sponsored,' 'gifted,' or 'ad' to enhance advertising literacy. Such initiatives would represent tangible applications of this study's findings in marketing practice, balancing commercial objectives with the goal of empowering young consumers.

6.4. Limitations and future research

This study was based in the United Kingdom, which has a diverse population and is a liberal democracy in the Global North, characterised by Western-centric societal values and consumer cultures. Future studies in alternative socio-political contexts could potentially yield insights concerning the role of culture in shaping the scope and focus of child influencers' content, and child viewers' interpretative repertoires as they engage with it. Systematic sampling from across distinctive nationalities and cultures, and the adoption of comparative strategies, could be used to identify and account for the influence of place and culture among child influencers, their interactions with child consumers, and their outcomes, especially in shaping children's self-awareness and their perceived sense of agency.

Based on the foundation built by this study, a worthwhile avenue for future research would be to examine how influencer agency evolves through created content. Future researchers could also adopt different methodological approaches to delve deeper into the topics presented here, employing life history narratives or netnographic methods that actively involve children in data collection and analysis processes. These methods could help to better understand the socio-cultural contexts of media production and consumption, and to explain the influence of contextual factors e.g., personal circumstances or the socio-technical features of platforms, on interactions between viewers and content creators. Involving children in such studies would also provide emic perspectives on the practices of their contemporaries, their meanings and their impacts.

The study's cross-sectional data collection leaves room for longitudinal research to trace the evolution of children's engagement from childhood through to adolescence. Such research could provide valuable insights into how interactions with media and influencers change over time, and how they are shaped by developmental milestones and evolving cognitive and social dynamics. Future research should also consider the evolving technological landscape of children's digital engagement. The growing influence of platform algorithms and design features (e.g., recommendation systems on YouTube, TikTok etc.) plays

a significant role in shaping children's content experiences and deserves further exploration. In addition, the rise of AI-generated influencers and synthetic media introduces new complexities into how children perceive authenticity and trust in digital environments. An intersectional approach is also recommended, examining how factors such as gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background influence children's engagement with influencer content. Furthermore, the potential for children to act as co-creators of content – participating in marketing campaigns or developing their own media – offers another rich avenue for action research, with important implications for their agency and digital literacy.

Finally, the research prompts a reconsideration of the role of social media platforms in child development, viewing them as significant agents of socialisation. It advocates for recognising children as active participants in the digital realm, aligning with the United Nations Children's Rights framework, which emphasises the importance of the protection, provision, and participation of children within digital spaces.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Junior Oliveira de Almeida: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Peter Lugosi:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Sarah Quinton:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix 1:. Profile of child participants and their participation across study stages

Child	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Weekly Child Influencer (CI) views	Favourite type of CI content	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Rick	7	M	Mixed	3 times (or more)	Craft	X	X	X
Lia	9	F	White	4 times (or more)	Cooking	X	X	X
Carla	8	F	White	3 times (or more)	Toys	X	X	X
Bea	9	F	White	4 times (or more)	Toys	X	X	X
Gisele	7	F	White	3 times (or more)	Pranks	X		X
Salma	7	F	White	3 times (or more)	Games	X		X
Mark	10	M	White	5 times (or more)	Toys	X		X
Lilly	7	F	White	4 times (or more)	Games	X		X
Noah	10	M	White	5 times (or more)	Toys	X	X	X
Vivian	7	F	White	3 times (or more)	Games	X	X	X
Alice	10	M	White	5 times (or more)	Toys	X	X	X
Andrea	8	F	White	3 times (or more)	Games	X	X	X
Stella	8	F	White	4 times (or more)	Cooking	X	X	X
Violet	7	F	White	3 times (or more)	Toys	X	X	X
Ben	7	M	White	3 times (or more)	Games	X		X
Diego	10	M	White	5 times (or more)	Music	X	X	X
Peter	8	M	White	3 times (or more)	Sports	X	X	X
Belle	8	F	White	3 times (or more)	Toys	X	X	X
Helen	8	F	White	5 times (or more)	Toys	X	X	X
Stacy	8	F	White	6 times (or more)	Games	X	X	X
Ophelia	7	F	White	3 times (or more)	Music	X	X	X
Frankie	7	F	White	3 times (or more)	Pranks	X	X	X
David	9	M	White	5 times (or more)	Games	X	X	X
Luna	8	F	White	5 times (or more)	Music	X		X
Giani	9	F	White	5 times (or more)	Games	X	X	X
Becca	9	F	White	5 times (or more)	Games	X		X
Nash	7	M	Mixed	3 times (or more)	Pranks	X	X	X
Seth	9	M	Mixed	3 times (or more)	Games	X	X	X
Beth	8	F	White	7 times (or more)	Games	X		X

Appendix 2:. Parent and child information

Parent(s) name(s)	Child(ren) name(s)	Parent(s) interviewed
Ann	Rick	Mother
Lisa	Lia	Mother
Daisy and Jorge	Carla and Bea	Mother and Father
Cleo and Alfie	Gisele	Mother and Father
Page and Diorgio	Salma	Mother and Father
Ruth	Mark and Lilly	Mother
Tanya	Noah and Vivi	Mother
Emma	Alice and Andrea	Mother
Paola	Stella	Mother
Hana	Violet	Mother
Fred	Ben	Father
Vania	Diego	Mother
Regina	Peter	Mother
Mel	Belle	Mother

(*continued on next page*)

(*continued*)

Parent(s) name(s)	Child(ren) name(s)	Parent(s) interviewed
Miranda	Helen	Mother
Stella	Stacy	Mother
Ruby	Ophelia	Mother
Clo	Frankie and David	Mother
Isabel	Luna	Mother
Sonia	Giani	Mother
Jade	Becca	Mother
Sasha	Nash and Seth	Mother
Valerie	Beth	Mother

Appendix 3:. Pictures used in the diamond ranking activity



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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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